

Sermon for March 14, 2004.

" What has luck got to do with it? "

Do you believe in luck and chance? If you say no, have you ever bought a lottery ticket? Or been to Las Vegas? Whenever I drive by the Salt River casino out on 101 the parking lot is always full. Enough of us must believe that it is at least possible to find gold at the end of the rainbow to make the whole venture profitable. We speak of someone having good luck or bad luck but what does that really mean? Can you attract good luck? We say we are not superstitious but keep good luck charms. And I always rub the belly of the fat frog statues found in many Chinese restaurants. It can't hurt!

So how do we, so-called rational and reasonable, Unitarian Universalists deal with the question of luck, chance and religion? I will attack that pesky question but since it is St. Patrick's Day we will begin in Ireland. Some of my Viking ancestors must have gone there so I have some claim to the green. Ireland of poetry and story is a mythical, mystical place that in this country is gleaned from immigrant grandparent's memories of the home they left behind because they had to. Famine, oppression and abject poverty were the unlucky soil that gave birth to all that poetry and those sentimental songs. Bad luck is something the Irish know a lot about. Of course that Ireland bears little resemblance to the

modern European state just like our America is not the New England of our founders. Until very recently it was a deeply divided country torn apart by violence and centuries of memories of injustice. On this day I do pray that all of Ireland may find the greatest treasure of all: a lasting peace. They have made a good start but we all know that peace making is often unpopular and plain hard work too.

Ray Bradbury writes in his book ***Green Shadows, White Whale***: *I looked out from the deck of the ferry and saw Ireland. The land was green, not just one ordinary sort of green but every shade and variation, even the shadows were green and the light itself that played on the wharf and on the faces of the custom inspectors. And down into the green I stepped, an American young man just beyond thirty suffering two sorts of depression, lugging a typewriter and little else. Noticing the light, the grass, the shadows, and the hills I cried out: " Green just like the travel posters! Ireland is green! " Lightning, thunder, the sun hid, the green vanished, shadow rains curtained the vast sky. Bewildered I felt my smile collapse as a gray and a bristly custom official beckoned. " Where did it go?" I cried " The green? It was just here? " The inspector stared at his watch. " It'll be along when the sun comes out." He said. "When will that be?" The old man riffled the custom index. "Well, there is nothing in the damn government*

pamphlets to show **when, where, or if**, the sun comes out. There is a church down there, you might ask "... " I'll be here six months maybe." " You'll see the sun and the green again, chances are, but in 1928 we had two hundred days of rain. It was the year that we raised more mushrooms than children." "Is that a fact?" " No, hearsay but that is all you need in Ireland. Someone to hear, someone to say and you're in business. Is that all of your luggage?" I set my typewriter forth along with the flimsiest suitcase. "I am traveling light this all came up so fast." " Your reason for being here in Ireland?" The inspector licked his pencil. "Reason has nothing to do with it!" I blurted. His pencil stayed while he lifted his eyes. " It's a grand start but what does it mean?" " " Madness!" " What kind would that be?" He asked politely. " Two kinds: literary and psychological. I am here to flense and render down the great white whale." Flense, scribble, render down, scribble, white whale." Ah that would be Moby Dick then."

I love that beginning. He is a good writer. But we are here to speak about luck. And just as quickly as light and shadows change in the Irish landscape just as fast can our lives change. We are happy one minute, confident, sure of ourselves, on top of the world and the next minute we are cast into the shadows of despair. Why? Why do bad things happen to very good people? Why on some day are we so lucky and on other days everything seems to go

wrong? Why is there pain and suffering? There are some people's lives where you wonder when, where and even if the sun will ever come out again. And we humans do not like to be out of control. This is the basis for many of those small rituals that we do to ensure good luck. We call them superstitions, but remember that what we call superstitions may be another culture's religion. We say we do not really believe in them but we do them anyway. So we throw rice, or nowadays birdseeds, at wedding couples to ensure fertility and luck. Four leaf clovers are treasured and large part of state budgets depends on the general public believing in the Roman Goddess Fortuna enough to buy large numbers of lottery tickets. How many of you have thrown salt over your shoulder, a precious gift to the gods in antiquity? Knock on wood really means to touch the cross of Jesus for a blessing and the reason the number thirteen is considered to be bad luck is because there were thirteen at the last supper and one of them Judas was indeed bad luck. But underlying all of these along with religious history is our need to feel that we can do something about how fate treats us. Thirteen by the way has always been a good number for me, in Chicago our apartment was on the thirteenth floor and twice I have flown to Europe on the thirteenth, safely. There are communal good luck symbols and highly personal and even idiosyncratic ones. You have all heard about players within the major sports who must wear one particular pair of lucky socks no matter how

old or torn because they believe it gives them good luck. Rabbits are such a symbol for me. If you have ever been in my office you may notice I have all kinds, metal ones, purple glass, multi colored hand painted Mexican ones and one framed copy of the invitation to my installation which also had a rabbit on it.

Some of you know why I consider rabbits my totem animal since I shared this story with you three years ago. But for those who never heard it and for those of you who have forgotten it here it is again.

Long ago, longer than I may want to divulge, at seventeen I was caught in the teenage throes of raging hormones, emotional ups and downs. You may have been there too. One day I felt rejected, utterly worthless and in a state of deep depression I went to a steep hillside in the beech forest. The forest was bathed in green light the stately straight trunks towered above me as and the leafy canopies embraced each other to form a living roof above my head. If I had noticed I would have seen how much this was like a cathedral, a sacred place where, as Emerson said, *beauty is evident as God's handwriting*. But I saw none of this. I was like a cartoon character, like Linus or Charlie Brown on a real bad day, walking around with a dark and hopeless cloud following me everywhere. So I sat there staring way, way down to the bottom of that hill and noticed the sharp drop off. Oh, I thought: if I jumped that would end to my pain. They, who had hurt me so badly, would be sorry

too! I had made the decision to jump and sat there gathering courage when I saw a movement, a flash of gray fur. And there it was again, behind a tall beech trees. A small rabbit appeared, hopped around exploring and sniffing the way rabbits do, wrinkling it's nose and then it settled down to eat some fresh green wood sorrel. It sat so very close to me that I could have touched its soft fur, had I stretched out my hand. As I watched it munch intensely, I remembered the soft touch of my grandmother's hand and how she had loved me no matter what. She was no longer alive, but somehow that rabbit seemed like a message from her. Live! That is what you are meant to do! Live and find joy in it! Taste life like those sorrels that little creature is consuming with so much gusto. I no longer wanted to jump. The rabbit saved my life that day. Chance you may say and yet.

Synchronicity might be a better word or grace. Did God sent that rabbit? Or did I really want to live? Came to my senses? Isn't that the same thing here?

What does luck have to do with it? Well this I do know. To be saved by such a chance and to attract good luck at all, we must first be open to receive it. The rabbit got me out of myself, out of the dark cloud and my eyes could see, once again, the beauty and joy around me. My eyes were blind and then they saw.

Richard A. Kellaway writes: *Chance is one of the most fundamental facts of our existence. That I should have been born*

in a particular place and time with certain inherent capacities and limitations may have an explanation, but it does not diminish the wonder at how much of what I am has been determined by the structures within which I chanced to live.

How many things in your life have happened it seems by chance? You went to that particular dance and you met your future spouse, you walked down that particular street and just escaped the roof collapsing on the other one? Is it fate or God or random chance that makes all this happen? Do you believe that things are pre determined? Or that God works in history? Some religions do. In this country the Calvinist doctrine of predestination terrified generations of churchgoers. The idea was that we are destined from birth to be saved or damned and that there is little we can do to change our fate. The reaction against the cruel and capricious God that doctrine taught converted many New England ministers to Unitarianism. William A Murray writes: *Because liberal religion does not need to find a purpose in everything that happens, we can recognize the possibility of random occurrences...Knowing that some things happen without a reason makes it easier to accept them than it would be if we believed all miseries are part of God's design.*

Oh but it is so tempting to try to find a reason why tragedies happen. Especially at those times in our lives when we feel a lot like poor Jonah swallowed by the whale, tossed and turned by

chance and fate. As told in Moby Dick:

" God came upon Jonah in the Whale, and swallowed him down to living gulfs of doom, and with swift slashings tore him into the midst of the seas where the eddying depths sucked him ten thousand fathoms down...and all the watery world of woe bowled over him...Then God spoke unto the fish; and from the shuddering cold and blackness of the sea, the whale came breaching up toward the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth; and vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. I don't know about you, but I have had days like that when I felt a lot like well, fish barf! The belly of the whale is a powerful metaphor for the times we get lost in our own fear and doubt and lose our hope.

Like the passing clouds and shadows over an Irish landscape our luck changes. We make much of our own luck. But many misfortunes we can do nothing about. No angry God does it to us, but the world into which we are born is full of dangers, changes and chances. Luck, says the Irish, is capricious and fickle but always possible. In the midst of poverty and famine luck may appear. Behind the tales of leprechauns and pots of gold lie hidden the eternal human hope. Today may be dark with clouds of war and fears about the future. But my friends, there is tomorrow. You never know when your luck will change.

With the Irish let us too believe in possibilities.

I will end with this quote from Soren Kierkegaard: *If I were to*

wish for anything I should not wish for wealth and power but for the passionate sense of what can be, for the eye which ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating as possibility?

He is right. May our eyes be open so that we can see clearly all the possibilities, the gifts and the grace of the life we have been given! May we always strive to use this gift wisely and with great love! Amen, so be it.

Sermon Footnotes from last week: *Green Shadows, White Whale* by Ray Bradbury, (Alfred a Knopf, inc.), *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, *The Trying Out* by Rev. Richard A. Kellaway, *A Faith for All Seasons, Liberal Religion and the Crises of Life* by William A Murray. (River Road Press, Maryland.)