“Oh, The Places You’ll Go!”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, March 27, 2011

Readings

(1) Kenneth Montgomery described Theodor Seuss Geisel, his classmate at Dartmouth College and life-long friend, this way:

He was not gregarious in the sense of hail-fellow-well-met; there was no sense of self-importance about him. But when he walked into a room it was like magician’s act. Birds flew out of his hands, and endless bright scarves and fireworks. Everything became brighter, happier, funnier. And he didn't try. Everything Ted did seem to be a surprise, even to him. ¹

(2) At the time of Richard Nixon's impeachment in 1974, the satirist and columnist Art Buchwald challenged his friend Dr. Seuss to turn his hand to political commentary. As a result, Seuss quickly revamped and exchanged the name used in one of his Early Reader nonsense tales titled Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now? It was about a pest and had been published two years earlier.

It appeared in Art Buchwald's Washington Post column on July 30, 1974 and in part read:

Richard M. Nixon will you please go now!
The time has come.
The time has come.
The time is now.
Just go.
Go.
Go!
I don't care how.
You can go by foot.
You can go by cow.
Richard M. Nixon will you please go now!
You can go on skates.
You can go on skis.
You can go in a hat.
But
Please go.
Please!
Nine days later, Nixon did resign, with Buchwald claiming full credit, and Dr. Seuss claiming “full intent.”

(3) In 1977, Dr. Seuss offered the Commencement Address at Lake Forest College in verse. It is titled “My Uncle Terwillinger on the Art of Eating Popovers.”

My uncle ordered popovers from the restaurant's bill of fare.
And, when they were served,
he regarded them with a penetrating stare.
Then he spoke great Words of Wisdom as he sat there on that chair:
"To eat these things," said my uncle,
"You must exercise great care.
You may swallow down what's solid…
BUT you must spit out the air!"

And as you partake of the world's bill of fare, that's darned good advice to follow.
Do a lot of spitting out the hot air.
And be careful what you swallow.

“*Oh, The Places You’ll Go!*”
(With thanks to Dr. Seuss)

In the spring of 1990 at age 86 with bone marrow cancer spreading, Theodor Seuss Geisel (pen name Dr. Seuss) enjoyed the publication of his 44th and final children’s book during his life. It became a *New York Times* best-seller for two years and sold 1.5 million copies. It consists of 919 words, 22 illustrations, salubrious sagacity, and bounteous bucketfuls of blessings.

Titled *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* it begins this way summoning adventure:

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You’re off to Great Places!
You’re off and away!

It continues,
You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.

And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

You’ll look up and down streets. Look’em over with care. …

And you may not find any
you’ll want to go down.
In that case, of course,
you’ll head straight out of town.

It’s opener there in the wide open air.

Freedom is ours!

Oh, The Places We’ll Go... an invitation, reminder, and challenge. This morning in sketching Dr. Seuss’ life and the spirit-filled wisdom that he offers, themes abound. Like his character Bartholomew with his 500 hats, it seems as if whenever you pick up one, another is there waiting.

Among the many themes he offered are courage, discipline, imagination, and decency, as he confronted the basics of our human condition – loneliness and love, success and failure, prejudice and justice-making… matters of reason, laughter, stubbornness, and human community.

So, for starters, the themes are
  o courage,
  o discipline,
  o imagination, and
  o decency.

And of course there is also the matter of discernment, finding one’s path, what theologians, especially Unitarian Universalist theologians, by which I include you and me, what we call continuous revelation… unfolding possibilities in the “Great Balancing Act” of our journey between our birth day and our death day.

Ted Geisel’s (Dr. Seuss’) second wife, Audrey did not know who he was until she moved with her two children in 1960 to La Jolla, California (Seuss’ home). She was in her early forties and thought he was a physician when she first met him. She had not read his books to her children… was unfamiliar with The Cat in the Hat, or The Grinch that Stole Christmas, Yertle the Turtle, Green Eggs and Ham, or One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish.
So, while many of us know his children’s books, there may be many like Audrey, and there is also much more to him than his success as an author and illustrator.  

Although his earliest books received more critical acclaim than commercial success, he ultimately sold more than 220 million copies around the globe with translations into 15 languages. Six books were published posthumously. 14 are among the top 100 children’s hardcover best sellers with two in the top ten: *Green Eggs and Ham* (4th) and *The Cat in the Hat* (9th).

In the 1930s, he was an ad man, a very successful advertising sloganeer and ad agency artist; a popular cartoonist for *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Vanity Fair*; among publications; an animator and a documentary film-maker with 2 Academy Awards; a lyricist; a provocative political cartoonist leading up to and during World War II, and a Pulitzer Prize winner. And then came his greatest success in the 1950s as an author, artist and editor of children’s books.

*Oh, the Places You’ll Go*. … and that he would go!

What startled me perhaps more than anything, although quite evident, was his intentionality. Dr. Seuss had an agenda, a philosophy, an extraordinary goal, with his work after the Second World War. “… he believed that political education ‘might more productively start at childhood.’”

His goal was to help improve the world and to combat “the corrupting influence of grown-up hatreds“ and grown-up follies. Social transformation will follow with caring values implanted in children.

Before some of the outlines of his life, I turn to his 1953 book *Horton Hears a Who!* Horton the elephant returns as a character and personifies concern for others, when he hears “the nearly inaudible voices of people who live on a microscopic speck on top of a dandelion.” No one else seems able to hear or see them, and Horton is ridiculed for his persistent, insistent advocacy, even cast out of his community. It’s an impossible situation, but Horton prevails, and we are left with Horton’s words, “A person’s a person, no matter how small.” An easily recognizable plea for equality, justice, the rights of minorities, and likely allegorical about anti-Semitism in World War II.

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.”

One Seuss scholar affirms Seuss’ intent “to train ‘children in emerging democratic cultures around the world, about the relationship between individual and the community.” One might question such grand purpose, if it were not for Seuss’ own comments.

Other examples abound. In *Yertle the Turtle*, Dr. Seuss declares
I know up on top
    You are seeing great sights,
But down on the bottom
    We, too should have rights….

And the turtles, of course...
    All the turtles are free
As turtles and, maybe,
    All creatures should be.

Similarly, in *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, an environmental warning written in 1949, Seuss again speaks about abuse of power saying, “But even kings can’t rule the sky.”

His life as well as well as his wild imagination took him many places. Born in 1904 in Springfield, Massachusetts, his family was prominent and prosperous. His grand-father born in Germany had started a brewery in 1876, which has father expanded along with investing in real estate and serving as Superintendent of Parks. His father was also a perfectionist in his habits, which his son Ted, as he was called, embraced in his own artwork, if not academics. His mother was fond of rhymes and always encouraged his doodling, which included allowing to leave his drawings on the plaster walls of his room.

At school and at times in the neighborhood, he suffered from anti-German prejudices during World War I, but responded by being one of the most successful student sellers of war bonds. Also, in high school he won acceptance through his humor and art, and was voted by his graduating class as the best wit and the best artist.

Eleven in his high school class went to Dartmouth College, and once again he focused on humor, parody and satire for school publications, rising to editor-in-chief of the *Jack-O-Lantern*, which was a commercially successful student magazine like the *Harvard Lampoon*.

A common campus greeting among Dartmouth students was “Oh, the places we’ll go.” Followed by the response, “… and the people we’ll meet.”

After receiving his degree in 1925, he attended Oxford for year at Lincoln College, but did not work very hard toward his announced goal of becoming an English professor. In lieu of an Oxford Ph. D., he added his own title of “Dr.” to his middle name, creating his persona of Dr. Seuss for his cartoons that he tried to sell in New York, following his return from England.⁹

A fellow student, Helen Palmer, was a Wellesley graduate and four years his senior. During one lecture, she was looking over his shoulder and saw his
notebook filled with fanciful artwork, as much as any notes. She congratulated him on having drawn a “very fine flying cow” with wings, and not long after suggested that he should pursue his drawing rather than academics. Soon, they were inseparable and married in 1927. She was a teacher, and initially he found greater success in advertising than for his cartoons and illustrations.

Oh, the Places You’ll Go! Continues,

You’ll be on your way up!  
You’ll be seeing great sights!  
You’ll join the high fliers  
who soar to high heights….

Except when you don’t.  
Because, sometimes, you won’t.

I’m sorry to say so  
but, sadly, it’s true  
that Bang-ups  
and Hang-ups  
*can* happen to you.

... You’ll be left in a Lurch.  
You’ll come down from the Lurch  
with an unpleasant bump.  
And the chances are, then,  
that you’ll be in a Slump….

Dr. Seuss’ first children’s books were published in 1937 and 1938 to some good reviews, but not so good sales. About the same time, his advertising success slumped a bit with the end of one long-running campaign. As World War II arrived, Ted Geisel, Dr. Seuss, was turning to political cartoons with Nazism, Hitler, and American isolationists as prime targets for his ridicule.

It was in 1942 in a controversial cartoon that he mocked our Minister, John Haynes Holmes for his pacifism and sympathy for Japanese Americans being put in internment camps. Even as Dr. Seuss had championed the rights of labor, Jews and blacks in the 1940s in his cartoons, he stereotyped Japanese, in ways that he later regretted.

He spent time in the army in Hollywood during World War II making propaganda films to bolster the morale of the soldiers and of citizens, and he considered film as a career briefly after the war’s end.

Having lived in Southern California during the War, he and Helen decided to move permanently to La Jolla. He turned his eyes again toward children’s
books with the encouragement of Bennett Cerf of Random House with 8 volumes published between 1947 and 1956.

*Oh, the Places You’ll Go* continues,

You can get so confused
that you’ll start in to race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.

The Waiting Place…

for people just waiting.
Waiting for a train to go…
or the mail to come, or the rain to go…
or waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting…

waiting for wind to fly a kite
or waiting around for Friday night…
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break…
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.
Everyone is just waiting.

But not for always, and not for Dr. Seuss, who says,

No! That’s not for you!
Somehow you’ll escape
all that waiting and staying.
You’ll find the bright places
where Boom Bands are playing.
With banner flip-flapping,
once more you’ll ride high!
Ready for anything under the sky.
Ready because you’re that kind of a guy!

His contracts and royalties with Random House were encouraging yet greater success was to come.

Oh, the places we’ll go…

Fame! You’ll be famous as famous can be,
with the whole wide world watching you win on TV.

Except when they don’t.
Because, sometimes, they won’t.

Up and down…. And up again… something like my favorite Buddhist saying: “Seven times down; eight times up.”

Dr. Seuss’ children’s books began to take off in the 1950s, and his wife Helen was instrumental in their success as an active participant in the editing of verse and choice of drawings. Ted, himself, did not make coffee, nor balance check books, so she was also the attentive housekeeper, as well as brilliant editor, while also writing children’s books of her own. At one point in 1953, she nearly died through paralysis from Guillain-Barré syndrome, needing a tracheotomy and an iron lung at first. While suffering chronic pain throughout much of her life thereafter, she did recover sufficiently to continue not only her work, but also their love of travel, hosting parties, civic engagements, and household management.

In the mid-60s, Ted, Dr. Seuss seemed to feel constraints on his work and his imagination. Helen’s symptoms were recurring. He began to work more and more on his own.

*Oh the Places You’ll Go!* continues,

I’m afraid that *some* times
you’ll play lonely games too.
Games you can’t win
‘cause you’ll play against you.

*All Alone!*
Whether you like it or not,
Alone will be something
you’ll be quite a lot.

And when you’re alone, there’s a very good chance
you’ll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.
There are some, down the road between hither and yon,
that can scare you so much you won’t want to go on.

On October 23, 1967, at age 69, Helen committed suicide with an overdose of prescription sedatives. Her symptoms had worsened. Ted had begun to spend time with the wife of a couple with whom they had socialized.

Her suicide note read:

Dear Ted,
What has happened to us?
I don’t know.
I feel myself in a spiral, going down down down, into a black hole from which there is no escape, no brightness. And loud in my ears from every side I hear, “failure, failure, failure…”

I love you so much … I am too old and enmeshed in everything you do and are, that I cannot conceive of life without you … My going will leave quite a rumor but you can say I was overworked and overwrought. Your reputation with your friends and fans will not be harmed … Sometimes think of the fun we had all thru the years…

*Oh the Places You’ll Go!* moves onward with its theme of hope that permeated Dr. Seuss’ writing, even as Helen had given up.

But on you will go
though the weather be foul. …
On you will go
Onward up many a frightening creek,
though your arms may get sore
and your sneakers may leak.
On and on you will hike.
And I know you’ll hike far
and face up to your problems
whatever they are.

Dr. Seuss, Ted, married Audrey Dimond nine months later. His success continued and expanded, as his books shifted their audience from children alone to adults with books like *The Lorax*, an environmental exhortation, in 1970:

Grow a forest. Protect it from axes
That hack.

Then the Lorax
And all of his friends
May come back.

UNLESS someone like you
Cares a whole awful lot
Nothing is going to get better.
It’s not.

There was *The Great Butter Battle* speaking out against nuclear weapons and the Cold War in 1983. He said, “I’m not antimilitary. I’m just anticrazy…. Why can’t we learn?”¹¹ Vartan Gregorian at an event at the New York Public Library observed that Dr. Seuss “helps us always to remember that we are young and never to forget we are responsible.”¹²
He died on September 24, 1991 at age 87 with *Oh! The Places You’ll Go!* as his valedictory.

Some tidbits about Theodor Seuss Geisel:

- One of his high school talents was wiggling his ears.
- He had an extraordinary “perfect” sense of color.
- He enjoyed playing practical jokes on some of his friends, but never mean-spirited ones.
- His books are used in literacy projects for the poor.
- He battled difficult cataract operations in his eighties and was a life-long smoker (never in front of children) who enjoyed vodka martinis; he came down with cancers of the throat and mouth that accompany such habits.
- He had terrible stage fright that led him to avoid television interviews with limited public speaking appearances.
- He was indifferent to his riches as royalties near the end of his life equaled two million dollars a year, with more going into several charitable trusts, including one for Dartmouth College.
- He kept a stuffed dog from his childhood with him in his studio throughout his life, until the day of his death when he entrusted it to one of his step-daughters.
- He was deeply beloved by friends and fans as truly good man, generous in spirit, and when asked about last words of advice, he declared, “We can … and we’ve got to … do better than this.”¹³

An honorary degree from Dartmouth in 1955, delayed for a year because of Helen’s illness and his steadfastness by her side, in its citation noted, “behind the fun there has been intelligence, kindness, and a feel for humankind.”¹⁴

- After Helen’s suicide he didn’t know whether he should kill himself or burn his house down. His first book that followed was *The Foot Book*, which includes the line about moving forward: “Left foot, right foot…” that is echoed in the wisdom of Ann Lamott’s friend (a priest). He tells her how to overcome the craziness around us saying, “Left foot, right foot, breathe”… with Seussian repetition, “Left foot, right foot, breathe.”

Left foot, right foot… *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!*… It concludes this way, filled with courage, discipline, imagination, and decency… wonder and a big heart.

Pilgrims on our own journeys….

You’ll get mixed up, of course, as you already know.
You’ll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go.
So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life’s a Great Balancing Act.
Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.
And never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and ¾ percent guaranteed.)
KID, YOU’LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!

So…be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea,
you’re off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So… get on your way.

“Oh, The Places You’ll Go!”

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1 Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel, Judith and Neill Morgan, Da Capo Press, NY, 35- 36.
2 Ibid., 220-1.
3 Ibid., 234-5.
5 Theodor SEUSS Geisel, Donald E. Pease, Oxford University Press, NY, 75.
6 Ibid., 75
7 Ibid., 94.
8 Ibid., 93.
9 The specific circumstances leading to his pen name are described in Pease, pp. 34 ff.
10 Morgan, 195-6.
11 Ibid., 249.
12 Ibid., 253.
13 Ibid., 287.
14 Ibid., 152.