

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County
Rev. Sandra Fees
Obstacles
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Most of us knew him first as Superman. In his real life, he also fit the part. He was of course handsome and strong. And he was also always striving toward a goal or learning a new skill. He was Christopher Reeve. Yesterday marked five years since his death.

In an accident at a horse riding competition in 1995, Reeve broke his neck between the first and second cervical vertebrae. His life would never be the same again. When he regained consciousness five days later, he was unable to move anything below his neck.

Feeling despair, he wondered to his wife Dana of only three years, "Maybe we should let me go?" It was probably hard for any of us to imagine Reeve unable to ride, sail, or ski. It was probably hard for us to imagine him unable to any longer look like the Superman we knew him as. It must have been impossible for him to imagine. His wife didn't have that problem. She said she would honor any decision he made, but added, "You're still you, and I love you." Reeve never regretted the decision to live.

Though he lost so much, he found a way to go forward. He did more than endure the hardship of being a quadriplegic. He exercised immense personal strength and integrity. He recognized he had some pretty important things, despite what had happened. He had the love of his family, he had money, and he had fame.

Rather than lamenting all that he had lost, he spent the remainder of his years using his resources to work toward a new goal. It's so remarkable to think about. How many of us could have done what he did? He used his fame and money to work toward a cure for spinal cord injuries, for himself, and also for others. Reeve always hoped that he would walk again. Given his type of injury, and despite three hours of exercise a day, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Reeve recognized that it would take science alongside exercise to do that.

So he and his wife set up the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation to help pay scientists to research a cure. And he became an advocate for stem-cell research. He never did walk except for a very few steps in a pool with great assistance. But he never gave up hope.

When I think about the people who have inspired me, they are almost invariably people like Reeve. They are people who faced great challenges

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and persevered. They aren't superheroes because things came easily to them. They aren't people who have had easy and unfettered lives. They are people who took the bad with the good, who found ways to turn the bad into something good.

What makes us incredible and powerful isn't our ability to cruise through life, but our ability to adapt and grow, to confront the impediments we face and come to terms with them. Doing that is a difficult and messy proposition.

The deep spiritual work of being human is to do what Reeve did. It means finding a way to make some sense of our lives despite and because of the obstacles. If we don't, we are going to lead lives of bitterness and anger, lives of frustration and despair, lives of meaninglessness.

When things don't go according to plan, then we need to change our plan. When things happen that don't conform to the way we think the world works, then we are going to need to rethink our understanding of who we are and what we believe. We're going to need to get a new plan, and find another path.

One of the common things that I hear from many people today is that these obstructions are lessons to make us better people or that they happen for a reason. I have heard this so often that I wonder if it is simply true or if it has become a coping mechanism for us as a society. It can give us comfort that our suffering and struggle are designed with a purpose. That there's a reason for it all. That it will all turn out okay.

But I confess, when I hear this, I can't help but wonder, is life really a lesson? If so, what kind of teacher gives such hard lessons? I mean, do we believe that the universe or God sent us ill fortune or hardship so that we would learn something?

I will tell you that I don't exactly share this viewpoint. I don't believe that Christopher Reeve became a quadriplegic so he could learn something new. That would be too cruel. For Unitarian Universalists who mostly envision God, Ultimate Reality, as love and goodness, or benign at worst, it is a stretch to think of God as a force that punishes or tests us in this way.

But it is also true that what happened to Reeve shaped who he would become. We do learn from life's challenges. The obstacles we encounter shape who we are becoming – for good or ill. They call into question everything we thought we knew, what we believe, what we thought our lives would be, and even our sense of who we are. They bring challenges to the

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way we thought things were going to be and to the way we thought things were supposed to be.

This can end up making us better people, but it doesn't always. It can help us discover hidden talents, but sometimes it takes nearly everything from us in the process. It can slow us down and help us make more informed decisions if it doesn't break us in the process. Obstacles can help us know that we really truly want something because we're willing to stick with it and overcome the barriers, or they can lead us to keep butting our heads up against the wall or to give up entirely on life.

Hindrances can keep us engaged by making things more interesting. If things are too easy, we can grow bored and lazy. Just think about the benefits gifted programs offer young people. Obstacles can keep us out of trouble. Curfews, barricades to ravines, for example, keep us from injury. They can help us find a better way, but they can also lead to more and more trouble. So sometimes they're good; sometimes not so good. What is an obstacle one day can become a gift the next, as we saw in our time for all ages this morning.

I wrestled with this topic and continue to. This week I even wondered why I had chosen such an impossible sermon topic. Because for each good thing I can say about how obstacles can benefit our lives, I can find a time when they destroyed people's hopes and dreams. On the one hand, there's the impeded stream which sings. On the other, there's the agony of wishing in the heart.

Ultimately, though, there's just no escaping it. Each and every one of us will face challenges in our lives – some perhaps more than others. Some will be minor snags. They may almost seem unworthy of mentioning alongside the story of someone like Reeve. Others are monumental in their own right. Some of them are of our own making and others are random, chaotic, and arguably beyond our control.

Just think about what happens when we have a mental illness or an addiction. Or when we face a chronic or debilitating illness or experience societal barriers to equality. We can probably each think of times we held attitudes with which we were raised that brought us more misery than joy. We may lose a job. Our spouse or partner may leave us. These are things we didn't ask for and would not wish on another person. The great mystery is how we go on and find joy and happiness in spite of and, yes, sometimes even because of these things. How is that possible? When something stands

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in the way, how is it possible to make sense of our lives and make the living matter?

Finding ways to do that is the real challenge we face. We need to learn to find blessings even in our brokenness. We need to learn to respond positively even when life tells us to "Keep Out" or "Stop." We need to learn to respond with love and kindness when what we want and love most is taken from us.

After his accident, Reeve became a Unitarian Universalist. He said,

If I believed my injury was inflicted by God, I'd have to believe that God wanted thousands of innocent people to die on 9/11, or any one of numerous other occasions you could mention. Unitarians don't believe in a punishing God, but in the essential goodness of human beings and that God is good. I think life is basically random and chaotic. The crucial question then becomes: are we generous, caring people?

Are we generous, caring people? The idea that life is random and chaotic may at first seem poor solace in tough times. But I have always believed an honest faith that recognizes the possibilities and the limitations we face is also a more hopeful faith. It focuses our attention on what we can do. It pushes us to be caring and generous people. Are we people of compassion and love? Are we extending ourselves in deep gratitude and generosity to each other and to the world?

When we experience the many injuries and impasses in our lives, the many wounds, our greatest hope is to embrace our own brokenness and not to run from it. And we need to find a way to do that for each other.

The challenges will come – bidden or unbidden. In the face of them, may we learn to be generous and caring people who can shed hope and light. May we learn to grow and adapt. May we remember the ultimate goodness of life and people, and see to manifest the love of God in ourselves and the world.

Let us strive to extend ourselves in compassion and kindness to each other. Let us learn to take the hand that has been dealt us and make something of meaning, purpose and beauty from it. Let us create something of ourselves that will add to the wonder and awe of this magnificent world that is ever-unfolding, ever-evolving.

May it be so. Blessed be.