

“Lessons and Carols, Humanist Style: Three Reflections”

Rev. Dr. David Breeden

17 December 2017

at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Reflection One

When one of my kids was little, I as a parent sometimes had occasion to say, “Please be patient!” To which my kid would reply, “I’m patient-ing!”

“I’m patient-ing!” my kid would say with an awful grimace.

No, that’s not standard grammar, but it *does* get the point across: being patient can feel like an overwhelming physical pain.

Being patient hurts, and often life can feel like it’s just all about waiting. And so there we sit, grimacing.

One reason for all the waiting when you’re a kid I think stems from a very old attitude: It’s better to be a grown up.

Here’s an example of the idea: Athena was the patron god of Athens (“Athens” / “Athena”), the god of wisdom, war, and crafts.

The poet Hesiod, who lived something like 2500 years ago, wrote this: (Zeus) “father of humans and gods gave birth to Athena by way of his head on the banks of the river Triton.”

Yes, myths can be a bit far-fetched at times. But the point seems to be that Athena was born a fully grown adult from the forehead of Zeus . . . I suppose because Athena’s abilities—wisdom and war and crafts—are *adult* sorts of things.

This attitude—that grownups are wise and kids are not—bothered me when I was young, and it bothers me still.

I agree more with an alternative idea well expressed by the British poet William Wordsworth who wrote,

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

"The child is father to the man." Or "the child is mother to the woman." Or "the child is parent of the adult."

So many of us wait to be wise. Or competent. Or ready. And waiting isn't fun!

But here's the thing: perhaps sometimes we're not ready for what is coming three or four or five steps down the road. But, each of us is always ready for what will happen next . . .

Reflection Two

Chunk of Fire

This is from Chapter VI of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain:

One of them's loose, and it aches perfectly awful."

"There, there, now, don't begin that groaning again. Open your mouth. Well—your tooth is loose, but you're not going to die about that. Mary, get me a silk thread, and a chunk of fire out of the kitchen."

Tom said:

"Oh, please, auntie, don't pull it out. It don't hurt any more. I wish I may never stir if it does. Please don't, auntie. I don't want to stay home from school."

"Oh, you don't, don't you? So all this row was because you thought you'd get to stay home from school and go a-fishing? Tom, Tom, I love you so, and you seem to try every way you can to break my old heart with your outrageousness."

By this time the dental instruments were ready. The old lady made one end of the silk thread fast to Tom's tooth with a loop and tied the other to the bedpost. Then she seized the chunk of fire and suddenly thrust it almost into the boy's face. The tooth hung dangling by the bedpost, now.

So far as I know, this is the only occurrence in the English language of the phrase "chunk of fire." Mark Twain wrote in the dialect I grew up with and is the only writer to really capture the dialect.

This was a common phrase when I was young, growing up in the Ohio River Valley, but it seems to have disappeared. I heard it used in the context of hospitality. "You ain't carryin' no chunk of fire. Sit down and stay a spell."

The phrase has disappeared because people no longer carry around "chunks of fire." But you know what a "chunk of fire is." It's that hot, glowing wood that you see at the very bottom of a fire that has burned very hot for a long time. If you've been camping,

you may have woke up in the morning and seen some glowing where last night's fire had been. If you throw some kindling on it and blow really hard, a flame will flare up.

The saying goes back to the time when fireplaces were used for cooking. Nowadays, fireplaces are mostly to look nice or for a little heat, so we tend to only use them in the cooler months. And we buy fancy fire starters. But when people cooked with fireplaces, they didn't have matches or fire starter, and they kept fires going all the time, year around.

In those days in the evening people banked the fire—they gathered the embers up in a pile, and then in the morning, they threw on some kindling, and the fire was good to go for breakfast.

But sometimes, the fire went out. So, you'd grab a bucket, hop on your horse, and go over to the nearest neighbor's house. Now, in those days, when you went to a neighbor's house, you were expected to "sit a spell and visit."

But not if you were there for a chunk of fire. In that case, you grabbed a chunk of fire, threw it in your bucket, and got back to build your fire as quickly as you could. No cooking could happen until the fire got right.

So, the saying for when you wanted a visitor to stay and visit longer was, "You ain't carryin' no chunk a fire. Sit down and stay a spell."

("Spell" being another old word that we can talk about another time.)

"You ain't carryin' no chunk a fire. Sit down and stay a spell." It's also a reminder that we don't have to be in a hurry all the time.

Reflection Three

If you've seen the Disney film *Coco*, you may have run into the charm and wisdom of traditional Mexican sayings for the first time. There's a world of them.

One of my favorites, though I can't remember how it goes in Spanish, is "If God wants you to be a tamale, He'll send you the shuck."

To get it, you have to know that tamales are traditionally cooked in corn shucks. If God wants you to be a tamale, He'll send you the shuck." Another way of saying it: Nature will provide.

For a number of years I lived at the eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert, which stretches from Southwest Texas into the northern quarter or so of Mexico.

The Chihuahuan Desert is a place lots of people go to find themselves. One of my artist friends used to say, "Do you realize how many true selves there are out here, waitin' on those Eastern folks to come out and find 'em?"

Fact is, you don't have to go to the desert and deal with rattlesnakes, scorpions, and tarantulas to find yourself, though it does . . . underline things. For example, an appreciation of water. Water is scarce there and rust colored and it stinks. But it's later and people have got to have water.

Once I was on a bus in the desert, high in the Sierra Madre (Occidental) mountains in Mexico on a twisty, curvy two-lane road. Our bus driver, Roberto, had lost his left arm. Consequently, every time he shifted gears—which is something you have to do a lot in steep mountains—every time he shifted gears—he had to take his hand off the steering wheel. Added to this, he chain-smoked, which added another thing for his arm to do. Also, he crossed himself each time he saw a roadside alter marking where someone had been killed, and there are lots of roadside alters around there, because lots of people have been killed on that road.

At one point Roberto looked into his mirror and saw the terrified looks on the faces of the passengers. He said, *—¿Porqué estás tan nervioso?*

"Why are you nervous?"

"Crees que no te queda tiempo para encontrar tu sepultura?"

"Do you think you don't have time to find your grave?"

It's a good question to ask: Why so nervous? Because, as Roberto knew, we *do* have the time to find our graves. It's the one thing we all have time for.

The courage and practice of being a self. It helps to stop a moment, feeling the "weight and density" of what often feels like a dissolving, shaking reality.

There's no being patient about it. There's no waiting required: You really are you. already. You already have the wisdom that it will take to face the next thing in your life.

You have time. "*¿Porqué estás tan nervioso?*"

SOURCES

Athena: <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/AthenaMyths.html>

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/74/74-h/74-h.htm>

The Chihuahuan Desert: <https://www.desertusa.com/chihuahuan-desert.html>

FirstUnitarian.org