

Coping with Chaos
September 25, 2011
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

And the earth was without form and void. Darkness was upon the face of the Earth. In the beginning, God created!

from Genesis

Lesson for all Ages

Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout
Would not take the garbage out!
She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,
Cook the yams and spice the hams,
And though her parents would scream and shout,
She simply would not take the garbage out.
And so it piled up to the ceilings:
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,
Brown bananas, rotten peas,
Chunks of sour cottage cheese.
It filled the can, it covered the floor,
It cracked the window and blocked the door
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,
Drippy ends of ice cream cones,
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,
Gloopy glumps of cold oatmeal,
Pizza crusts and withered greens,
Soggy beans and tangerines,
Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts...
The garbage rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall...
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,
Globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,

Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried-up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold French fries and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of Cream of Wheat.
At last the garbage reached so high
That finally it touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.
And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout said,
"OK, I'll take the garbage out!"
But then, of course, it was too late...
The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot right now relate
Because the hour is much too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!

Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out
Shel Silverstein – 1969

“Creative Chaos” by Rick Kimball

“My life is chaos,” said a member of the worship committee during a check-in last spring. Well you need to be careful what you say at our meetings. Your personal joy or concern may just become a full hour of worship. “Let’s do a whole service on coping with chaos,” the committee responded. “Let’s help people deal with the chaos in their lives.”

I thought for a time I might write about controlling and not just coping with chaos. But controlling chaos is an oxymoronic thought – with emphasis on the oxi, not the moronic. After all, it was my thought. It just happens to be self-cancelling.

Controlling chaos is a lofty, enticing goal, but it is also unattainable. Chaos is by definition uncontrollable. Try to control it, and it multiplies, for that is its essence. Chaos is creation. Out of apparent nothing, out of primal swirl, out

of annihilating clash of energies and particles comes something else. Out of chaos comes creation. Out of chaos comes life. Out of chaos comes death. You cannot control chaos. You can only accept and re-create with the something that chaos creates.

When Tirrell and I visited family recently, two of our grandchildren, aged eight and four, hurled themselves into the midst of dinner preparation. Our daughter-in-law Danielle looked at them sternly. “Do not create chaos” she said. But her laudable cause was lost. The life that chaos creates reciprocates by feeding the chaos. The next day, in a conversation unrelated to the first, Danielle’s father good naturedly observed of this intergenerational family that “We make a lot of chaos around here.”

Chaos is creation. Take our national congress as a concrete example. Congress was chaos this summer as it faced economic challenge, all its people particles running off on wild and unpredictable political courses of their own. Yet from this chaos came creation, creation of new meaning for the term “contempt of Congress.” If contempt of congress in this new sense is a crime, the whole world may well be guilty.

But Congress is too depressing. For a more positive example, take this congregation. Seen from outer space by some god through a telescope, we must look like a bunch of crazy ants or subatomic particles shooting around at random in all directions at the same time. That god is doubtless busy elsewhere on Sunday morning, so never sees us preparing for worship, with the choir rehearsing in one corner, somebody else tapping on microphones at the pulpit, others getting out collection plates, practicing a skit, making coffee and new friends, saying “hi” to old friends, turning the big sanctuary ventilator on and off - a chaotic mix of wildly individual parts moving with speedy abandon on courses of their own.

But chaos is creation, and from our Allen Avenue chaos comes this congregation, drawn together by the forces of shared ideals and goals and search., like the bits and pieces forming the graphic on today’s order of service. Out of chaos comes the nurturing warmth of this weekly hour. Out of chaos comes our family. Out of chaos comes communal commitment to bettering our world. Out of chaos comes our shared acceptance of life’s mystery.

And from this family that is us comes the supportive communal strength that flows both out of and into us, building from and rewarding our presence here.

Chaos is creation. Don't try to control it. And don't just settle for coping with it. Embrace it instead.

“Channelled Whelk” from Gift from the Sea

by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

The Shell in my hand is deserted. It once housed a whelk, a snail-like creature, and then temporarily, after the death of the first occupant, a little hermit crab, who has run away, leaving his tracks behind him like a delicate vine on the sand. He ran away, and left me his shell. I too have run away, I realize, I have shed the shell of my life, for these few weeks of vacation.

I mean to lead a simple life, to choose a simple shell I can carry easily – like a hermit crab. But I do not. I find that my frame of life does not foster simplicity. My husband and five children must make their way in the world. The life I have chosen as wife and mother entrains a whole caravan of complications. It involved a house in the suburbs and either household drudgery or household help which wavers between scarcity and non-existence for most of us. It involves food and shelter; meals, planning, marketing, bills, and making the ends meet in a thousand ways. It involves not only the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker but countless other experts to keep my modern house with its modern “simplifications” (electricity, plumbing, refrigerator, gas-stove, oil-burner, dish-washer, radios, car and numerous other labor-saving devices) functioning properly. It involves health; doctors, dentists, appointments, medicine, cod-liver oil, vitamins, trips to the drugstore. It involves education, spiritual, intellectual, physical; schools, school conferences, car-pools, extra trips for basket-ball or orchestra practice; tutoring; camps, camp equipment and transportation., It involves clothes, shopping, laundry, cleaning, mending, letting skirts down and sewing buttons on, or finding someone else to do it. It involves friends, my husband's, my children's, my own, and endless arrangements to get together; letters, invitations, telephone calls and transportation hither and yon.

This is not the life of simplicity but the life of multiplicity that the wise men warn us of. It leads not to unification but to fragmentation. It does not bring grace; it destroys the soul.

What is the answer? There is no easy answer, no complete answer. I have only clues, shells from the sea. The bare beauty of the channeled whelk tells me that an answer, and perhaps a first step, is in simplification of life, in cutting out some of the distractions. But how? Total retirement is not possible. I cannot shed my responsibilities. I cannot permanently inhabit a desert island. I cannot be a nun in the midst of family life. I would not want to be. The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere, or an alternating rhythm between these two extremes; a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and communion, between retreat and return. In my periods of retreat, perhaps I can learn something to carry back into my worldly life. I can at least practice for these two weeks the simplification of outward life, as a beginning. I can follow this superficial clue, and see where it leads. Here, in beach living, I can try. Here, I am content. I sit down at my desk, a bare kitchen table with a blotter, a bottle of ink, a sand dollar to weight down one corner, a clam shell for a pen tray, the broken tip of a conch, pink-tinged, to finger, and a row of shells to set my thoughts spinning.

I love my sea-shell of a house. I wish I could live in it always. I wish I could transport it home. But I cannot. It will not hold a husband, five children and the necessities and trappings of daily life. I can only carry back my little channeled whelk. It will sit on my desk in Connecticut, to remind me of the ideal of a simplified life, to encourage me in the game I played on the beach. To ask how little, not how much, can I get along with. To say – is it necessary? – when I am tempted to add one more accumulation to my life, when I am pulled toward one more centrifugal activity.

“Carpe Chaos” by Lenora Trussell

First thing in the morning I start in chaos. I have my most creative thoughts in the morning. That is when chaos is able to attach a foothold with my consciousness. I think it is because I am emerging from dreams that are often so chaotic there are no words to describe the adventures my mind takes me on in the middle of the night.

Sometimes when I am not able to embrace chaos, I get very overwhelmed. Karen Briscoe, one of my roommates in San Francisco 40-odd years ago once experienced my being overwhelmed. For the life of me I cannot remember what I was overwhelmed about. I mean I had no significant other in my life, no children, my job was not particularly demanding, I was not in debt and I was leasing a very affordable room month to month in one of the most gorgeous cities in the world. This very wise roommate simply shared these words with me: "Clean up your room, clean up your life."

Like I am prone to do, I took those words literally, and have found them to be the repetitive sage advice that gets me moving through my often-chaotic life. I actually look forward to getting in over my head with what all I attempt to bite off before I consider chewing. After all in the song "I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly" the query is pondered about the ability of the old lady to swallow a cow. Well the simple answer is any non-vegetarian can swallow a cow... one burger at a time.

Over the years, I have often reminded myself when I get that overwhelming feeling, to begin with the most simple task. Sometimes I cannot get my physical energy or mental faculties motivated to clean my room. I have been known to open a drawer and move things around until there is more of an order present. I find that if I can focus on something outside of my chaotic consciousness, peace comes and that pesky overwhelming feeling fades.

It became evident during the last worship committee meetings that other members of the committee have similar kinds of rituals they use for letting chaos flow through them and make some sense. One likes to make lists another finds balancing their checkbook brings focus. Several of us talked about simply writing helps take that chaotic energy and plant the seeds of creativity.

On December 12 next year the Mayan calendar comes to an end and astronomers tell us that the sun and the earth and the center of the universe come into alignment. This happens about every 13,000 years for earth. Some say it is the end of time and others say it is yet another transition, of which earth has gone through many.

At any rate, some say we are going to get a glimpse of the tree of life. I'm not sure what is going to happen. It could be chaotic or it could be

enlightenment or even both or perhaps neither. However, if there were an apple on that tree, resisting the urge to take a bite would be prudent! A little chaos is a good thing but that apple might be biting off more than we can chew!

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“Chaos Theory” by Erica Bartlett

Chaos theory started becoming in vogue around the time I was in high school and college, in movies like *Jurassic Park* and in popular literature. According to Wikipedia: “Chaos theory studies the behavior of dynamical systems that are highly sensitive to initial conditions, an effect which is popularly referred to as the butterfly effect. Small differences in initial conditions (such as those due to rounding errors in numerical computation) yield widely diverging outcomes for chaotic systems, rendering long-term prediction impossible in general.”

I even had a class on Chaos Theory and Fractals, a requirement for my Computer Science degree. But I didn't need the class to understand it because my college life was a prime example of the theory.

In my case, the initial condition was not a butterfly, but rather an innocent request at a Young Religious Unitarian Universalist conference when I was in high school. A friend from Caribou (some may remember Kate Quinn-Easter) asked my brother if he wanted a pen-pal, since her friend Michelle wanted one and she knew Jeremiah liked to write letters. He said yes. The end result? When I was a freshman and he was a sophomore at Northeastern University, my brother found out that he was quite unexpectedly going to be a father. In short order Michelle had moved down to Boston, they were married, and my niece Sabine was born. I've reflected on the unpredicted chain of events that brought us to that point, and how even a slight difference would have changed the outcome.

When I think about coping with all of that – helping my brother get through Calculus 4 that quarter, supporting him and Michelle when they told my parents, being the only family in the Boston area to assist them, trying to smooth things out in the family, and of course trying to get my degree – I realize that what helped was focusing on the equally unexpected joy. I had never spent much time around small children, and I found my niece a delight. A continuing one, I might add, because she is now an intelligent,

thoughtful, talented, lovely young woman who will be sixteen on Friday. I cannot, now, imagine the world without her.

Her presence also helped us cope with another chaotic event in my college years. Sometime, somewhere, somehow, something had triggered cells in my mother's body to change, to experience rapid, uncontrolled growth. The result was a diagnosis of cancer at the start of my senior year, and her eventual death. She had always wanted grandchildren, and while she was initially unprepared to become a grandmother at age 42, she, too, loved my niece. But if Kate hadn't asked my brother that fateful question, it's very possible my mom never would have met a grandchild.

Coping with the randomness of my mom's death has been harder, but I learned from that first example to seek the unlooked for positives. This time, I used the experience as a reminder to appreciate life and make the most of my time. As a result, I have improved my health and am now on the path to helping others do the same, a goal and ambition that I might never have even discovered otherwise. This unanticipated joy is what I try to remember as I go through the continuing chaos that is life.

8-23-11

Reading attributed to Arthur Schopenhauer
as told by Joseph Campbell to Bill Moyers

When you reach a certain age and look back over your life, it seems to have had an order. It seems to have been composed by someone, and those events that, when they occurred, seem merely accidental and occasional turn out to be the main elements in a consistent plot. Who composed this plot? And just as your dreams are composed by an aspect of yourself of which your consciousness is unaware, so your whole life has been composed by the will within you. Just as those people whom you met by chance became affective agents in the structuring of your life, so you have been an agent in the structuring of other lives. And the whole thing gears together like one big symphony, everything influencing and structuring everything else. It's as though our lives were the dream of a single dreamer in which all the dream characters are dreaming too. And so everything links to everything else moved out of the will in nature.

Closing Words

“Who” by Rick Kimball

Who are we
to call some plants *invasive weeds*?

Who are we
to sputter about *clutter*?

Who are we
to declare a concept *meaningless*?

Who are we
to conjure up *coincidence*?

Who are we
to conceptualize *random*?

Who are we
to conceive *chance*?

Who are we
to cut *dream* apart from *real*?

Who are we
to decide this had no *cause*?

Who are we
to say that was *accident*?

Who are we
to consider life *chaotic*?

Who are we?

And who is that laughing out there?