

Errors are Part of the Game
October 1, 2017 – Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

Reading from All I Really Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten
by Robert Fulghum

A troubled man paid a visit to his rabbi. A wise and good old rabbi, as all rabbis try to be. 'Rabbi,' said he, wringing his hands, 'I am a failure. More than half the time I do not succeed in doing what I must do.'

'Oh?' said the rabbi.

'Please say something wise, rabbi,' said the man.

After much pondering, the rabbi spoke as follows: 'Ah, my son, I give you this wisdom: Go and look on page 930 of The New York Times Almanac for the year 1970, and you will find peace of mind maybe.'

'Ah,' said the man, and he went away and did that thing.

Now this is what he found: the listing of the life-time batting averages of all the greatest baseball players. Ty Cobb, the greatest slugger of them all, had a lifetime average of only .367. Even Babe Ruth didn't do so good.

So the man went back to the rabbi and said in a questioning tone:

'Ty Cobb -- .367 – that's it?'

'Right,' said the rabbi. 'Ty Cobb -- .367. He got a hit once out of every three times at bat. He didn't even bat .500 – so what can you expect already?'

'Ah,' said the man, who thought he was a wretched failure because only half the time he did not succeed at what he must do.

Theology is amazing, and holy books abound.

"Errors are Part of the Game"
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

October 1, 2017
UU Congregation of Danbury

I have very fond memories of watching games at the old Yankee Stadium, and have always been quite taken with the spiritual messages baseball holds for us. I agree with Rabbi Harold Kushner when he says that:

Life is like the baseball season, where even the best team loses at least a third of its games and even the worst team has its days of brilliance. The goal is not to win every game but to win more than you lose, and if you do that often enough, in the end you may find you have won it all.

Waterbury native, and former Commissioner of Baseball, Fay Vincent, said:

Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball, and precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often – those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.

-- Francis T. Vincent, Jr., former Commissioner of Baseball

Baseball even tracks the number of errors. In the last five years, major league baseball has averaged more than 2800 errors a year. That number may not be exact but it's in the ballpark.

Errors are part of the game – the game of baseball, and the game of life. Accepting that we aren't perfect is necessary to healthy living. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham call it "the spirituality of imperfection." This spirituality "is thousands of years old," they say.

And yet it is timeless, eternal, and ongoing, for it is concerned with what in the human being is irrevocable and immutable: the essential imperfection, the basic and inherent flaws of being human. Errors, of course are part of the game. They are part of our truth as human beings... (Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*)

To deny our imperfections is to deny our essential humanness. To accept our imperfect humanness is to accept the truth about ourselves. To accept our own truth is very Unitarian Universalist.

Why is it then, that we have such a difficult time with imperfection? This is not a question directed solely to you. It is one I ask myself almost every day. God knows, I am far from perfect (despite my best efforts!). And yet, for some reason, I maintain a standard expectation for myself that doesn't allow for mistakes. What is this quirk that makes me believe – that makes

many of us believe – that we could (and should) get things right all the time?

I've decided that it's our desire to be like God. It's our way of being "in harmony with the Divine." Except that we confuse "being in harmony" with "being in control." We have difficulty accepting our human failings, so we aspire to be better, to do better – next time.

There is merit to these aspirations. I believe that it's good to grow in ways that make us better people. But sometimes we equate being better people with being perfect people. We focus on our failures and shortcomings in ways that make us bitter and resentful – like the man who thought he was a failure because he only succeeded half of the time. When we use our successes and

failures as a measure of our worth as human beings, we deny our own inherent worth and dignity.

Some of us Unitarian Universalists have a tough time accepting ourselves in all our humanness. We have no "sacraments" or holidays that call us to contrition and forgiveness. We have no "savior" whose death made up for our sins. Jesus taught us how to be human, not perfect. He revealed his humanness in the ways he lived his own truth. Donald Johnston reminds us that:

(Jesus) did not always
turn the other cheek...

His family found him
quite embarrassing....

He wasn't sure
about the Messianic role,
let alone his own.

He was ambivalent
about the law...

[What do we learn from this?]

An imperfect Jesus
makes you feel your way
into the life of one
who really lived.

Jesus was not perfect. He was very human. And that was his strength. He demonstrated a way to be authentically human and true to himself.

I sometimes wonder what Jesus would have to say about church folk today. Would he direct his criticism toward religious fundamentalists? Or, might we be the Pharisees he'd chastise? We, Unitarian Universalists, who seem to aspire to the perfectability of human nature?

There are a number of folks who think that our congregations should be different from some other religious traditions. We don't have a creed in which everyone believes. We profess Principles and Purposes to guide us in our living:

the inherent worth and dignity of every person...
justice, equity and compassion in human relations...
acceptance and encouragement to spiritual growth...
a responsible search for truth and meaning...
the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process...
a goal of world community...
and respect for the interdependent web of all existence
of which we are a part.

There is no doubt that our Principles and Purposes speak to the best in human relations. What they don't address is the worst in us as human beings. Unlike other religious traditions, ours does not speak to the human condition in all its limitations. We look to loftier goals and truths that often leave us feeling inadequate.

When we expect ourselves to be perfect people, we limit our own potential to be fully human. We need to deal with the fact that we're never going to be perfect parents with perfect partners and perfect children, perfect members, scholars, employees,

employers – fill in the blank for yourself. In baseball, a missed catch or throw can make the difference between winning or losing the game. That certainly hasn't stopped the team from getting back out on the field to play another game. The players learn to accept that errors are part of the game. They learn from their mistakes. And, they keep on trying.

“If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again.” That's an aphorism with which I grew up. My Dad was not a church-goer, but he certainly had a knack for preaching the truth. (And he took us to a lot of baseball games just to reinforce the message.) Learning to accept failure as an opportunity to try again has been a guiding force in my life.

When I first attended the Unitarian Universalist Society in Amherst, Massachusetts, I remember wondering if I could ever be “good enough” to be a Unitarian Universalist. This was in 1975,

before the Principles and Purposes were adopted. The emphasis was on "tolerance" of other people back then. Knowing myself to be quite judgmental, I doubted that I could make the grade as a Unitarian Universalist. Coming out of a Catholic background, I brought with me that old "black and white" thinking (what we called it that old "nun" thinking) that had characterized my youth. If I couldn't be tolerant of others then I couldn't belong. I would have to go back to the Catholic Church, where, at least it was permissible to be judgmental. It was also where I could be forgiven for my failings.

That is what makes baseball so appealing as a game-plan for life. You get a hit, you strike out, you walk, you win, you lose, and life goes on. There's always the next game, or the next season. Baseball has shown the best and worst of human nature. The game itself suggests an ideal that is compelling to our sense

of fairness and fair play. The players don't always live up to the standards we set for them. But we love them anyway. Even when they lose (only maybe not as much)...

Unitarian Universalist congregations are different. We are not as quick to love one another despite our shortcomings. I think part of it has to do with our lack of a common identity as a congregation and religion. We are so protective of our individualism and our separate paths that we lack a team spirit. We end up finding fault with one another – or with our ministers – because we can't seem to get together for the good of the whole congregation. We set our own rules and when we break them, we're left with only ourselves to blame.

This Congregation talks a lot about community. But as a member in the Akron congregation once suggested to me, "we really lack the kind of tribal connection that characterizes a

community. We're a bunch of individuals running around with no sense of ourselves as part of a tribe." (I admit that this was a better baseball metaphor if you happen to live near Cleveland and the team-that-must-not-be-named.)

I thought it was an odd way to describe what we weren't as a congregation. Why would we want to be part of a tribe? But then, I realized that he was correct. Community is created in even the most primitive cultures through a shared ancestry, language, or name. To be part of a "tribe" is to share a common interest, occupation or habit. A tribe is perhaps the most basic of social organizations. It relies on a spirit of cooperation and goodwill to function properly and to sustain itself. Being part of a tribe means being able to accept defeat and keep on going. One only has to be a Mets fan to understand this. There are many years of defeat between winning seasons. And, even though a

team may be on top once again, no one among them is perfect – not even the Yankees. But we love them anyway because they are our teams.

Our congregations play by different rules. What if – and this may seem like an out-of-the-ballpark idea – but what if we thought of the congregation's ministry as if we were building a team for success? What would we need to put together a winning team? People to cover all the positions is a start – preferably those skilled at fielding errant hits and good follow through. A good pitcher – or two – would be helpful. A pitcher who keeps an eye on the ball and who knows when to get out of the way of a line drive. How about a catcher who is savvy enough to convey the right signals at the right time? A couple of heavy hitters would be nice. A coach to whom the players can turn for

encouragement and inspiration. And perhaps most important – a team spirit that motivates you to win, and consoles you when you don't because no matter what, you're in it together – playing on the same team.

Every congregation has its challenges. Most have experienced some quality ministry – and some less than healthy ministry. In the time I've been with you, I know that you care a great deal about each other and this Congregation. That may be your greatest strength. And I think you continue to learn new things about ministry with each change in leadership.

Here's what I think you've learned: it takes everyone working together cooperatively to keep this Congregation functioning. This hasn't always been easy – or even successful.

Right now, you're missing several key players needed to keep this congregation healthy. Some have been traded to retirement homes. Others due to illness, or death. From this, you've learned that you need to have someone – or a few someones – warming up in the bullpen. That way, when a key player needs to be retired in the middle of an inning, you're not caught up short without backup.

You've also learned that you win some, and you lose some. That won't change even when you call your new minister. But you are still a team, strong in spirit, and imperfectly human.

A lot of the ministry we are doing together in this interim time requires teamwork. I can provide the coaching, and even some training, but it's up to all of you to put yourselves out there on the field. Remember – when we work together as a team, we cheer one another on, even – or perhaps especially – when we've

made an error. And then we move on to the next pitch, the next hit or miss, the next inning, and the next season.

So, in the spirit of our faith, I say "let's get out there and play ball!"

Closing Words

Source Unknown

"10 Commandments for an Enthusiastic Team"

1. Help each other be right – not wrong.
2. Look for ways to make new ideas work – not for reasons they won't work.
3. If in doubt – check it out. Don't make negative assumptions about each other.
4. Help each other win and take pride in each others' victories.
5. Speak positively about each other and about our congregation at every opportunity.
6. Maintain a positive mental attitude no matter what the circumstances.
7. Act with initiative and courage as if all depends on you.
8. Do everything with enthusiasm – it's contagious.
9. Whatever you want – give it away. (This may sound odd, but it works that way; whether it's power, respect, enthusiasm, compassion, recognition, or love.)
10. Don't lose faith – never give up.