

Suffering, Chance and Destiny

The old psalm says: “ A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.”

It was September 11th 2001 and I was in Sacramento California, minister in a large Church opposite the capital. The telephone woke me and a church member said to me “Turn the television on!” and hung up. And there on the screen unfolded an unimaginable horror of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. I remember the incredible suffering, the sheer unreality of it all.

Did those people who got on those planes have an appointment with Destiny? Or was it by chance that they boarded those planes? What about the people in the Twin Towers? Was it their time to die? What about all the suffering?

About two weeks later I got another phone call this time from Canada. A member of Knox Stratford, had slept through his alarm that day. On a normal day he worked in the Twin Towers on the very floors from which there was now no possibility of rescue. Later than his usual time, he saw what was happening while on his way to work. Amidst the dust and chaos, he saw the Towers collapse.

Was this God’s hand preserving his life? And if so what about the other folks on the planes and in the Towers who arrived for work on time? Was it this young man’s destiny to be spared? Was it luck? Pure chance? What do you think?

In the case of the young man from Knox a lot of us might choose to comfort ourselves by saying that God was in that sleeping through the alarm and give thanks. But is that honest?

I think that we want to cling to the idea that as Shakespeare said “There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we

will.” And I think that comes from a belief that if we knew all the variables, we would be able to predict the future. And so, God would know the future and therefore could intervene.

This however, is for me, an older view, philosophically known as Determinism. It was a view that could be confidently traced back to Newtonian physics where it was thought that we lived in a predictable cosmos that operated by constants and laws that were immutable.

The mathematician La Place reinforced this scientific view. He said that if the causal laws of the mechanistic functions are known and initial conditions given, then the future of any particular event can be correctly predicted. This strengthened the case for thinkers of the Deterministic school. And so, it seemed that the case remained in favor of people believing in destiny, either religious or secular; that is until 1927.

Vishwamohan Tiwari, East Indian philosopher and engineer, has written about this turning point. He says, “In 1927 came the Uncertainty Principle propounded by Heisenberg, later on a Nobel laureate. It states that it is not possible to determine both the position and momentum of a small particle like an electron accurately. If its **position** is determined accurately then its **momentum** cannot be measured accurately and vice versa. This demolished the La Placian verdict, and the case for free will, rather than destiny, became stronger both in the mechanistic and human world.”

Since that time there has been a lot of work on the movement of random particles which reinforces Heisenberg. For me the case moves daily towards ‘free will’ rather than towards destiny.

But Winston Churchill has an honest quote that I think can help us: He said "Destiny is not a matter of **chance**, it is a matter of **choice**; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."

Churchill obviously believed that destiny could be planned for.

He began as a poor student with a speech impediment. He won a Nobel Prize and became one of the most inspiring speakers of all time.

Similarly, instead of giving up after losing legislative race after legislative race, Abraham Lincoln persisted and changed what looked like a destiny of failure, to become perhaps the greatest President of the United States. Charles Atlas the famous body builder began as a 97 lb weakling. These men played the cards they were given. They let the tough cards build their character and their character became their destiny.

I believe that what happened on 9/11 was a matter of people making choices, some of them unconscious, some of them very dark indeed, but nevertheless they were choices that affected the destiny or final outcomes of many people. All of those folks, either in the planes or in the Twin Towers, made choices to be where they were. The planes were high jacked and deliberately flown into the buildings **by choice**. That is what made that day so horrific.

If the planes had happened by accident to crash into the Towers, we would have accepted that and the world would have moved on. But we recognized that these were deliberate choices and that caused us consternation and fear.

Similarly, either subconsciously or deliberately, the young man from Knox slept through his alarm and that was also on the choice level. It could have been denial, or an unwillingness, or a simple memory loss or a late night choice to party the night before, and because of that choice, he lived. If he had successfully obeyed his alarm he would have died.

“Ah but!” you say to me “The fact that he did not die, this could have been destiny or the action of God.

And I then say to you, you need to explain the horrific deaths of those who did set their alarms and got up. Is God that capricious or

is it what it is, an incredible tragedy that has resulted from human choices? And are we really free or not?

The discussion gets even more interesting when we review the life of Jesus of Nazareth. What we know about that historically, was that he chose to die. He was very popular in the area of Tiberias, so why did he set his face to go to Jerusalem?

In his mind that was his destiny. And he interpreted that destiny from the suffering servant passage in Isaiah that called on the Messiah to suffer.

But it seems to me even here he made the choice to go to Jerusalem. It was an exercise of his free will. He could have stayed safe in Tiberias, and history would have gone on without his influence.

In our personal lives when we make bad choices, it is fundamentally dishonest in my view to blame it on God or destiny. We say that it was God's will that I lost that job or hit that tree with my car, but was it? What choices did we make and others make, that ended that particular job or created that traffic accident? What responsibility do we have as human beings for our choices and if destiny shapes our ends what does that do to our sense of taking responsibility for our actions?

Is there another way to think about choices and destiny altogether? I think so. But it is counter intuitive. In fact, it is the very opposite of destiny.

It is **uncertainty**.

In the book Seven Laws of Spiritual Success Deepak Chopra talks about the **wisdom of uncertainty**. He says that we need to factor in uncertainty as an essential ingredient of our experience in the belief that when we accept uncertainty, solutions will spontaneously emerge out of the problem, out of the confusion disorder and chaos. He says that the more uncertain things seem to

be, the more secure we should feel, because uncertainty is our path to freedom.

As Christians we could also say that God is in this, with us, because the uncertainty principle appears to hold up in science as part of the **created** order. When God created all things, uncertainty was a given like gravity!

Given the amazing complexity of the world, it is reasonable to argue that uncertainty has a purpose and must be in the mix of reality for a reason. We could even say that it might be the principle behind the freedom we all cherish so much in Canada.

How do we embrace freedom and make it work for us? Is it all perhaps in **how** we make the choices we make?

Christians believe that we can **get Help with our choices from God. We don't have to be alone in our choice making.**

Once a little boy in one of my Sunday school classes said that God was too far away and he did not know how to reach God. And one of the teachers said "Oh honey, God is in your heart!" And the little boy's face lit up!

As St. John says; "Children, because you are from God you have **in** you, One who is greater than anyone in the world."

So, how do we access this Greater One within?

What Deepak Chopra says is that when we have a tough choice to make, the heart has the tiniest feeling in it to let you know what is the right choice for you. We feel it either as feeling of comfort or discomfort: With that feeling we know whether to proceed on the same path or to change course, to wait, to act, or to do nothing. The heart knows, he says. As Wallace Simpson famously said. "The heart has reasons that the reason does not know."

The New Testament teaches the same thing: The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit in our hearts, to lead us into the truth. And the truth always sets us free!

Now if God is in the human heart and responds to us on this gentle level, then prayer can come alive for us. We can talk to God and have a conversation. Sometimes this will be in meditation or in the silence, that our hearts speak to us. And out of this consult, we will get a feeling about what to do.

The Bible also teaches us that we are guided through our actions, positive, or negative: we reap what we sow. This seems to be a part of human destiny. There are consequences to choices and behavior.

So, we need to ask “What are the consequences of this particular choice that I am making? Will this choice bring happiness to me and also to those who are affected by this choice?”

As Christians we ask God in our hearts for guidance and then after prayer, we can choose to be guided by the heart’s message of comfort or discomfort, or not. If after prayer, the choice still feels comfortable, we can go ahead with that choice. But if the choice feels uncomfortable, we can pause to visualize the consequences of our actions. This guidance will help us to make better choices for ourselves and all those around us. Pausing to listen to our hearts is called Wisdom and wisdom is a gift from God that we can all ask for.

If we look at the situation of the Twin Towers, we are compelled, I believe, to come to the conclusion that human beings are awesomely free to choose their destiny for good or ill.

The great preacher William Sloane Coffin, formerly of Riverside Church, once asked the question of God “Why did you give us so much freedom? We can’t handle it!”

The only answer I can give to this freedom gift, is that love cannot exist without it!!

Thus, our freedom is necessary for the grand purpose of the world, which is love. Having a choice to love or not to love is absolutely basic.

If God interfered so much that nobody ever died, or suffered, or was ever killed, we would not have the planet, as we now know it, at all. And we would also not be really free...

We would have instead a Divine dictatorship.

To want to be free is essential to our humanity. It is also essential to loving and to being loved.

We cannot compel love. It must be free.

But there is also such a thing as faith, where we become partners in freedom and uncertainty, with God, and we are humble enough to ask for God's help.

And the help **will** come, often in ways we do not expect and always in terms that we are never abandoned; for God is in our hearts no matter what.

Psalm 91 says "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee."

I think that all things considered we cannot limit the actions of the almighty. There are times when God intervenes to protect us.

Churchill once said about his role in the second world war: "I felt as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial."

Time and time again Churchill's life was spared. He courted danger and a thousand fell at his side but it did not come night to him. I believe that there was divine protection over this man for the good of the world. It was his destiny to be, where he was, when he was, at that particularly time of war, when so much was at stake.

This is what David meant in this psalm. In his own case after a life full of danger, he like Churchill, died in his bed. David believed that God was in his life in a very direct way.

So, although we are awesomely free, there may come moments when danger shall not come nigh to us.

But, if I had been in that plane heading towards the Twin Towers expecting to die, I would have been talking to God. I would have asked of course for a change in the cards, but if that was not to be, I would be still assured that God was with me. I would have committed my spirit to God, for it is God who gives life and death and my faith assures me that death is not the final end. God works on both sides of death, in this world and the next, to bring us life.

Karl Barth, the German Christian theologian, once was asked about the world ending with a nuclear holocaust and what he thought about that.

He replied “Jesus loves me this I know...”

For him it finally came down to an act of faith that this world is good, that we are free and that God loves us and that finally we will be alright because of that.

That to me is the destiny: **that finally all things will work together for good, both for those who love God and those who do not.** Because, for any of those who do not believe, it is often a problem of their misunderstanding. I believe that for them a day will come, either in this life or the next, that the misunderstandings will clear as the mists of time give way to eternity.

I have a question for you!

What world famous woman is remembered today as an advocate for people with disabilities. Who became a suffragist, a pacifist, an opponent of Woodrow Wilson, a radical socialist and a birth control supporter? What woman in 1915, along with George Kessler, founded an International organization which is still

operating today as an organization which is devoted to research in vision, health and nutrition?

Who was it who helped found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Who was it who traveled to over 39 countries, making several trips to Japan becoming a favorite of the Japanese people?

What woman met every U.S. President from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon B. Johnson and was friends with many famous figures, including Alexander Graham Bell, Charlie Chaplin and Mark Twain!?

Why it was a woman who at 18 months of age became blind and deaf and dumb!

Yet she achieved an amazing destiny.

How?

A great deal of credit goes to Ann Sullivan. She was a teacher who attempted to teach this blind deaf and dumb girl sign language, a girl who otherwise was destined to be institutionalized. The task appeared impossible but Ann **chose to believe otherwise** and trust **the wisdom of uncertainty** to guide her through her choices.

On an inspiration, one day she put water on this then little girl's hand and then spelled the letters of 'water' into her hand. Suddenly there came over this isolated little child's face a look of wonder!

She had understood and after all those years of no connection to the outside world she was now connected!

Her teacher changed her destiny, and that of the world. Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller went on to change a destiny, choice after choice.

If they could do this, despite these odds, so can we!

May God bless your choices!

Amen.

