



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

”We Are Already Saved from Perfection”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

3 June 2018

frederickuu.org

The first time I remember reflecting on the meaning of utopia was when I was assigned to read Thomas More’s classic sixteenth-century book with that title. In More’s conception, *utopia* was spelled with the Greek prefix “οὐ” (“not”). That prefix was attached to the root word τόπος (“place”)—which together meant “*no place*.” I remember thinking, “That’s kind of great.” He admits up front that **u-topia is *nowhere*. No place is “perfect” for everyone or for all conceivable times and situations.**

Our modern conception of utopia derives from the prefix “eu” (“good”). So, “*good place*” instead of “*no place*.” (A lot of people are familiar with the Greek prefix “eu” in regard to *euthanasia*, meaning “good death.”) And if we had all day, I would pause and invite us all to sit back and watch the first season of NBC’s surprisingly insightful sit-com *The Good Place*. Are there any *Good Place* fans out there? In all seriousness, that show is a shockingly good introduction to ethics—and a brilliant example of how **a seeming utopia (a “good place”) can end up being a tortuous hellscape.**

The Good Place is streaming on Netflix if you are curious to learn more about it. If you prefer a non-fiction example of what I’m talking about, the Netflix documentary *Wild, Wild Country* is a fascinating case study about how a Hindu guru formed a utopian community in eastern Oregon that went deeply off the rails. It is a riveting example of truth being stranger than fiction, and of how **a community that seems utopian in many ways on the surface can be rotting at its core.**

And while I am tempted to speak at length about both *The Good Place* and *Wild, Wild Country*, I will instead share with something briefer: a poem that I encountered recently while attending the annual Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference (known as AWP). I went because my wife is an English professor at Frederick Community College as well as a published writer, and for me it was interesting to attend a professional conference outside my field of expertise.

One of the many things that stood out to me at AWP is that it is a gathering of people to whom practices like writing poetry really matter. And among the many powerful poems that stood out to me over the course of that conference, the one I liked most was: “**Good Bones**” by Maggie Smith. As you listen to it, I invite you to keep in mind this tension we have begun to explore between the idea of utopia as a “*good place*” and utopia as “*no place*”:

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

That poem strikes me, in a sense, as *conservative* in the best sense of the word: *hope* in what an individual might accomplish—in this case to restore a currently run-down

piece of property—but tempered with a realism about limits of human nature, the human capacity for evil, and a basic grasp of the tragic dimension of our existence.

On the one hand, Smith’s poem “Good Bones” is perhaps a bit too pessimistic. On the other hand, one of the reasons her poem resonated with me is that our tradition of Unitarian Universalism has often had the opposite problem. In rightly rejecting overly-pessimistic views like “Original Sin,” our theological forbears sometimes overcompensated by being overly optimistic about both the future and the potential for us humans to perfect ourselves and society.

One influential example of what I’m talking about is from the late-nineteenth century, when the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke helped popularize the idea of the “progress of mankind onward and upward forever,” leading to the conviction that progress is essentially inevitable.

An even more famous example comes from another nineteenth century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who said, “**I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one. . . . But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.**” (Dr. King later borrowed the quote from Parker.)

But the spirit of that nineteenth-century liberal optimism — “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever” and “the arc of the universe bends toward justice” — is much more difficult to defend today. Many of our nineteenth-century ancestors did not foresee twentieth-century events like the horrors of World War I or the Holocaust, which starkly reminded us that **progress is very much not guaranteed**.

Here in the early twenty-first century, we also know more about our place in the universe than our late nineteenth-century forbears did. In the wake of paradigm-shifting discoveries by Einstein, Hubble, and many other scientists, we know that **the universe doesn’t bend toward justice, if anything it bends toward entropy**, chaos and “disorder,” toward less organization and structure, toward (if you want to be technical about it) an equilibrium of “inert uniformity.” There is no inevitable progress. The only guarantee science currently offers is the inevitable heat death of the universe.

So that’s the bad news! The good news is that we don’t have to worry about that cosmological horizon for a few trillion years. In the meantime, the question before us, in Dr. King’s words, is whether we will choose “chaos or community.” In the longest term,

entropy will win. But in the short term, we *can*—we can—through cooperation and solidarity choose to bend the universe (at least locally, regionally, and provisionally) toward justice and peace, love and reconciliation.

Along those lines, one of my favorite philosophers is the late American pragmatist Richard Rorty. He was intimately familiar with everything I have been outlining sharing about entropy, and about the fact that progress is not inevitable. Nevertheless, one of the lines from his writing that has always stuck with me is that, **“The utopian social hope which sprang up in nineteenth-century Europe is still the noblest imaginative creation of which we have record”** (277).

What I understand Rorty is saying is that although it would be unreasonable for us to have the same naively-assured optimism that our nineteenth-century forbears had about the possibilities of achieving utopia, we would also be foolish to dismiss the nobility of what they invited us to imagine for the future of our species. So while we UUs shouldn't give up noble social hopes we have imagined like our 6th Principle (“The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”), we should be realistic about human limitations—both real and perceived—when working toward that goal.

Relatedly, I was listening to an interview a few months ago with one of my UU minister colleagues, who said something that stopped me in my tracks. The interview was with The Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen, who is the Senior Strategist for the UUA's "Side with Love" campaign. Side with Love is the UUA's public advocacy campaign focusing on LGBTQ equity, immigrant justice, and racial justice; clearly, Rev. Nguyen cares about some form of those nineteenth-century utopian social hopes. And regarding the potential for achieving those social hopes here in the early twenty-first century, I was fascinated to hear her say these words: **“We are already saved from perfection.”**

When I heard her say that I thought, “Wow. There's something deeply true about that.” I also found myself exhaling and relaxing. “We are already saved from perfection.” I find that to be an incredibly liberating starting point. We can go ahead and let go of perfection. **We are neither going to reach perfection, nor be perfect in the process.** I would actually invite you to consider that there neither *is*, nor can ever be a “perfect” that is right for all people, at all times and places. (In all honesty, I don't know what that would even mean or look like.)

Here's a little more context about that quote from Rev. Elizabeth. She said, "We are already saved from perfection. Doing this work is not neat and tidy, it is messy. You can't get an app for it. Develop the spiritual fortitude to embrace the discomfort and the mistakes." Since it is impossible for us to achieve our goals perfectly, I hear an invitation to find a middle ground that includes fiercely advocating for justice as well as being compassionate with ourselves and one another, and being realistic about both our human potential and human limitations as a species for understanding and navigating life's mysteries.

The Process-Relational philosopher Bernard Loomer said it this way: "**The passion for perfection is a protest against the unmanageable vitalities of concrete life. It is a yearning for the bloodless existence of clean-cut, orderly abstractions. It is, in short, a yearning for death.**" That's not quite as direct as "We are already saved from perfection." But I appreciate the point that as long as we are alive, there will be messiness, complexity, change, and imperfection. The only way to a "bloodless, clean-cut, orderly abstraction" is death—which at least from where I'm standing doesn't feel like too perfect an option.

I plan to revisit this topic of utopia at least annually for a few years, and for at least some of those future sermons, I will likely invite us to reflect on some of the lessons from utopian experiments in the past. I have explored that angle once before in a sermon about the nineteenth-century utopian community known as Brook Farm. (As you can likely guess, that particular utopian effort didn't work out exactly as perfectly as planned.)

From a different angle, I also wanted to share a few brief reflections about the new book from the Harvard professor Steven Pinker titled **Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress**. Some of you may be familiar with his previous book along the same lines, titled The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. This latest book is an expansion of his argument that, despite some disturbing trends in the current short run (including rising authoritarianism and increasing wealth inequality), Pinker encourages us to not forget the many longer-term trends over the past few centuries which contain a lot of good news about progress made increasing the quality of life for almost every human being on this planet.

Although there are some legitimate criticisms of Pinker's perspective as "oversimplified, excessively optimistic...and technocratic," it is also the case that he has compiled compelling evidence about major progress in our world. I cannot replicate in a few minutes what it took Pinker more than 500 pages to detail, but I will offer three of his most-prominent examples, regarding life expectancy, sustenance, and inequality.

1. Life expectancy: "In the mid-18th-century, the life expectancy in Europe and the Americas was around 35, where it had been parked for the 225 previous years for which we have data. Life expectancy for the world as a whole was 29..." (So back then, I should have been dead, on average, five years ago.) In contrast, the life expectancy today for the average person in the world is 71.4 years. **In less than two centuries of progress, the addition of four decades to the average human life expectancy worldwide is remarkable** (53).
2. Sustenance: In the past there was a legitimate fear of worldwide hunger, but thanks to technological innovations from the Industrial Revolution, "**The world needs less than a third of the land it used to need to produce a given amount of food....**" The environmental scientist Jesse Ausubel has estimated that the world has reached Peak Farmland: we may never again need as much as we use today." Further innovations are on the horizon through genetic engineering technologies like CRISPR (76).
3. Inequality: Today "more than 95 percent of American households below the poverty line have electricity, running water, flush toilets, a refrigerator, a stove, and a color TV. (A century and a half before, the Rothchilds, Astors, and Vanderbilts had none of these things.) Almost half of American households below the poverty line have a dishwasher, 60 percent have a computer, around two-thirds have a washing machine and clothes dryer, and more than 80 percent have an air conditioner, a video recorder, and a cell phone.... The rich have gotten richer, but their lives haven't gotten that much better. [The rich] may have more air conditioners than most people, or better ones, but **by historical standards the fact that a majority of poor American even have an air conditioner is astonishing**" (117).

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm on the record about wealth inequality being a major threat to our democracy and for solutions along the lines of a Universal Basic Income. So

come the revolution, I've got my pitchfork ready. At the same time, I appreciate Pinker's reminder that even as we continue to work toward our goal of "world community with peace, liberty, and justice"—not merely for some, but for *all*—let's also pause periodically along the way to celebrate the progress we have made.