



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Making Sense of Chaos”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on December 14, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

You need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star. Friedrich Nietzsche

They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm. Dorothy Parker

*Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony.
In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.* Albert Einstein

Sermon

Modern life seems totally chaotic, doesn't it?

We hear about suicide bombers killing people merely sitting at outdoor cafes, troubled teens shooting automatic weapons at classmates, and the Ebola virus infecting thousands of innocent people. We hear about wild weather—historic droughts and historic floods, extreme cold and extreme heat, or volcanoes flowing down roads and mudslides burying cars and houses. We hear about politicians who can't find anything to agree upon and who seem more interested in cutting the other side down than building up the country.

We hear about people who've lost their jobs and people who can't find jobs. We hear about people marching in the street for justice they haven't received, people who hack private information from our computers and steal our identities. We hear about people trying to manage their aging, infirm parents, while raising challenging, rambunctious children.

Nothing seems calm anymore. Nothing seems like it's safe and dependable upon. Chaos reigns. Does it feel that way to you? Do you want less chaos and more order? I sure do.

Some scientists suggest we have more order than we think we do because chaos is less chaotic than we think. James Gleick, a science historian, helped popularize 'chaos theory' after publishing his book, *Chaos: Making a New Science*, in 1987. Jane and Bruce King lent me this book as a prompt for the service because they won the bid to give me a sermon topic at last winter's auction.

I first learned about chaos theory from *Jurassic Park*, the movie released in 1993. In the movie, Dr. Ian Malcolm, played by Jeff Goldblum, explained that chaos theory was the study of complex systems and predictability. To summarize chaos theory, Goldblum's character described the 'butterfly effect,' a real term coined by Edward Lorenz, an MIT mathematician, meteorologist, and pioneer of chaos theory. The term represents the idea that if a butterfly flapped its wings in Peking, it would cause a rainstorm in New York.

Avis Harley illustrates this concept in her poem, "Chaos," from *The Monarch's Progress: Poems with Wings*:

These are the wings
that brushed the breeze
that woke the wind
that quickened the clouds
that gathered the gale
that swept the sea
that stormed the shore
and thrashed the trees
caught in the path
of Hurricane's wrath.

These are the wings.

Her words broadly illustrate the orderliness of the butterfly effect. This progressive chain of events doesn't sound so very chaotic though. And that's the theory: chaos has an underlying pattern of connections.

When things in our lives seem chaotic it usually means we just don't see the order or structure that caused the result we think of as chaotic. More likely, the system is too complex for us to readily see the structure lying beneath it. Chaos theoreticians study the global nature of these complex systems.

When Gleick subtitled his book *Making a New Science*, he communicated that something new was happening. From the beginning when humans first questioned why things happen the way they do, up through the Age of Enlightenment and until the mid 1960s, scientific endeavor was focused on breaking down systems and looking at its parts. Quantum physics developed out of this search for the small. It was generally assumed that if we could figure out the parts, we'd understand the whole.

But that didn't prove to be true. Quantum-size particles, it was discovered, behave nothing like larger molecules and complex systems. No sense could be made of these parts and how they related to the whole. But believers in the inherent order within chaos found patterns no one else had seen. These discoveries were so revolutionary Gleick says that 20th century science will be remembered for just three things: relativity, quantum mechanics, and chaos.

You and I may not see a direct connection between the butterfly flapping its wings in China and the rainstorm in New York, but if someone cuts down all the trees in the Brazilian rain forest, ecologists have made it clear to us that the air we breathe in Athens, Georgia, will be adversely affected. Scientists also connect global climate change to the cumulative effect of our burning fossil fuels and reducing the ways excess carbon dioxide can be removed from the atmosphere. Connections like these exist everywhere on earth and throughout the universe.

And isn't that what our UU Seventh Principle affirms? We are part of an interdependent web of life. Like the butterfly, what happens to you has an impact on me. We know this truth in our own social circles. If my friend's child dies tragically and unexpectedly, my friend and her family will be affected. And because I'm a friend, it will affect me, too, and maybe my sadness will affect my family. We share the anger and sadness with the rest of the country over the unnecessary deaths of young black men. We also share the joy of completing milestones in our lives. We share our joys and sorrows knowing it matters to us and we'll be there for each other.

When we act upon our values by showing more love here in Athens, we know we're creating more love in the world. We depend upon the ripple or butterfly effect to magnify our efforts. Chaos theory supports our values and confirms that it matters what we do.

Some theologians interpret this underlying order as proof for the existence of a Creator God. This new science supports ancient scripture for Chaos lies at the beginning of many religious traditions. It refers to the original void and emptiness that existed before it was structured and formed. Divine forces ordered creation. In Genesis, sacred to Jews and Christians, we're told, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." Similarly, in Greek mythology, Chaos, the primeval void, first existed and out of chaos Gaia or Mother Earth came to be. In ancient Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Sumer, India, and many other ancient regions, chaos came first.

Jungian psychologist and astrologer Karen Hamaker-Zondag says, "Religion tries to make sense of our world. The chaos mythologies try to explain that although life seems chaotic, it's really ordered." She adds, "Astrology is one of the earliest attempts made by man to find the order hidden behind or within the confusing and apparent chaos that exists in the world."

Astrology goes further than most world religions because it tries to provide more control over one's life by predicting future events or conditions. Knowledge of the stars and planets at the time of someone's birth and at some given point in time gives astrologers a framework to help people make plans and reduce the randomness of life's outcomes. That's their theory, though their predictions are difficult to prove.

The Big Bang is the scientific story of creation, another thoroughly chaotic beginning. From an infinitesimal point in the void burst the stuff that ordered itself into stars, comets, planets, and life on earth. Order out of chaos.

As the Creation shows, chaos has generative value. The blank piece of canvas calls to an artist to fill it with beauty. The blank paper or computer screen calls an author to fill it with prose. The silent instrument waits for the musician to create harmony. The need to elect a President creates opportunities for new leaders to emerge. The need to fill a Sunday service creates opportunities for new inspiration. Without chaos, life would not be very interesting.

Not too long ago *The Lego Movie* was released. Maybe not so creative a title, but it was a fun film based on the Lego building block toy. Emmet, the main character, lays bricks for a living. (It's a Lego world after all.) Each day he joins the building team and follows instructions. He sings about the joys of doing only what he's told, no less, no more. Life always follows the same pattern and he's very happy it's so predictable.

Then he meets Lucy, also known as Wyldstyle, a woman unlike anyone he's ever met. She conforms to no rules. She's been told of a prophecy about a Special person who will one day save the world from the strict routine of the man in charge of the world known as Business.

Emmet doesn't understand how he could be a savior. He's a follower, not a leader; a builder, not an architect. But in the course of the movie Lucy points out Emmet's world has no freedom, no creativity. She's chaos, he's order. In the crisis that develops, they need each other. The independence, freedom, and creativity of Chaos needs the planning and goal-setting of Order. Together they save their world.

We need the chaos in our lives to create openings for new adventures, too. But we can't exist with chaos alone. We need the safety, dependability, and structure of order to keep our lives moving forward. Too much stress and chaos serves us no better than too much structure and order. The latter feels like a straight-jacket and the former requires one.

Chaos theorists believe life contains a natural rhythm where chaos constantly moves towards order, and order moves toward chaos, ad infinitum. Knowing that, we can be assured that what seems like chaos now will not always be that way. Instead of fighting chaos, we can move with it and see it more positively. The world seems chaotic right now. But the heightened focus on racial inequality, for example, provides a long-awaited opportunity and motivator for dialogue and change.

But how does that help our lives, which still feel out of control? I think understanding that connections and order exists beneath the surface of chaos is comforting. It suggests we need to look more closely at our lives to see the patterns that explain and perhaps predict why the chaos in our lives occurs. It also gives us hope that life will not always seem so chaotic.

Perhaps if we increase the amount of exercise we get, we won't need to replace too tight clothes. Perhaps if we plan our mornings better, getting the kids off to school won't seem so frantic. We really do have more control than we admit.

These connections seem obvious. For the ones that are harder to connect, if we trust the truth of our interconnectedness, we might feel more in control. If not, I'd feel hopeless when it comes to creating a better, more loving world. I have to believe that if I make one person's life in Athens better, then there will be a ripple effect that helps others. Chaos theory tells me I can believe it and not by faith alone.

Chaos theory reminds me that although we're not in direct control of all the variables in our lives, we can influence many. If chaos seems to overwhelm you, reach out to this community. Not only may you create meaningful relationships by doing so, we get the opportunity to be helpful in return. Let us be butterflies and flap our wings with love, bringing sunshine to the world. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Does your life feel more ordered or chaotic? How do you maintain/find your right balance?
2. Share a time when some chaos may have led you to new opportunity, insight, or creativity.
3. How have you felt a 'butterfly effect'? Do you feel your actions make a difference to others?
4. Does your understanding of the universe, ordered or not, lead you to specific beliefs? Share.