



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

It's time to do the Hokey Tokey

Clay Nelson © 7 October 2018

One of the challenges I face in selecting sermon topics is trying to find something new where I can venture into uncharted territory. So far it has been to no avail. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes was right when he said, "There is nothing new under the sun." But ever hopeful I tried again this week. I bet no one has ever tried to find a sermon in the Hokey Pokey, or the Hokey Tokey as it is called in New Zealand. I guess the name was already taken for an ice cream. But a quick search of the interwebs revealed that any number of preachers from various faiths had given it a go.

Back in 2000 four Unitarian ministers in a mediation prayer group reflected on a cartoon where a pilgrim had climbed a mountain to consult the guru living there. The pilgrim asked "What's it all about?" The Master replies, "You do the hokey pokey and turn yourself around—that's what it's all about." The ministers then challenged each other to find a sermon in the hokey pokey and preach it on the same Sunday.

I decided it sounded like fun to try, and besides I found no sermons on the hokey tokey, so even if the words are the same except for one letter, it is kind of new ground. Right?

I confess I have to begin with borrowing a story in one of those four sermons. It is about the alleged composer of the Hokey Pokey (alleged because there are various claims to authorship). His name was Larry LaPrise, a native of Detroit. His song writing career pretty much ended with the composition of the Hokey Pokey in the late 1940s. But he made a modest fortune out of it and spent the rest of his life as a postal service employee. The song was eventually picked up by bandleader Ray Anthony who recorded it in 1953 on the B-side of another novelty song-dance, "The Bunny Hop." In no time, the Hokey Pokey was everywhere. School yards. Bar mitzvahs. Weddings. You name it. Today children around the world know and sing it by other names like Hokey Cokey, Hokey Tokey, Boogie Boogie, and Hootchie Cootchie.

By whatever name the actions are the same:

*You put your right hand in/ You put your right hand out
You put your right hand in/ And you shake it all about
You do the hokey tokey/ And you turn yourself around,
That's what it's all about.*

The song continues with the left hand, right leg, left leg, your head, your bottom, and eventually your whole body or self. The word "hokey" means "stupidly simple." Well, the song and the dance are stupidly simple and easy to learn except for those of us with two left feet.

The story goes that when he died in Boise, Idaho at the age of 83, Larry LaPrise's funeral lasted a long time. The Hokey Pokey was playing in the background. The undertakers tried to get his body in the coffin. They put his left leg in, and the right leg would pop out, they put

his right leg in and the left leg would pop out. They put his whole body in and he'd soon be sitting up and shaking, and turning around. But that's what it's all about. As they wheeled his coffin out to the hearse, which was parked on a hill, the undertakers lost their grip and the coffin headed down the street, whizzing by traffic, going through red lights, and eventually flying in the open door of a local pharmacy, and coming to a crashing halt in front of the counter. The coffin cover fell off and the body sat up straight in its bier. The pharmacist leaned over the counter and asked, "Can I help you?" And LaPrise replied, "Yeah, have you got something that will stop this coffin?"

After that you are probably beginning to wonder if that is really what it is all about? After all we are Unitarians. We are a serious lot not given to silliness and frivolity and we certainly don't dance in church. Where are you going with this, preacher? Time's a wasting.

Okay I'll try to reclaim my usual decorous self and take the question as to what it is all about more seriously, for we all know life is serious business.

Trying to figure what it is all about goes back at least to the first humans who created gods. Greek mythology saw the gods using us as pawns in their divine chess game. We were moved about the chess board at their whim and whimsy. To quote Duke Gloucester in King Lear, As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, They kill us for their sport.

The Hebrew author of Job took issue with this view in his satirical novella. You can't get much more serious than Job. In his story, God and Satan are having a conversation. God is bragging about his faithful servant Job. Satan responds with 'but of course he is faithful, look at all you have given him—a fine home, healthy and strong children, riches and comforts beyond compare—take all this away from him and Job will curse God and the day he was born.' God accepts the challenge and within days Satan has all of Job's good fortune wiped out.

'What's it all about?' Job cries out. His friends all tell him it is because of some grievous sin that he committed. For his friends life is about seeking the good side of God, of pleasing God; and those who please God will be rewarded with a comfortable and good life. Therefore his friends insist, Job must repent of his sin and get right with God. But Job knows of no sin in his life or in the life of his family who have been taken from him. His friends however, argue that His life is out of his control and his sin is that he piously thought it was his to decide its course. Job does not accept that answer either.

The premise is that God is wise and the creator in all things. His friends construct this syllogism: Suffering comes from God. God is Just. Therefore Job is guilty. Job responds with this syllogism: Suffering comes from God. I am innocent. Therefore God is unjust. According to Stephen Mitchell, a translator of the Book of Job, a third syllogism is not even imaginable: Suffering comes from God. God is just. Job is innocent. (no therefore.)

So according to this, what it's all about is humanity humbly accepting the fate that God has bestowed. Even in the final syllogism that Mitchell suggests, God is still the author and director of life. God is still in charge and his ways are just and good. There is yet another syllogism that even Mitchell does not consider. Suffering does not come from a god or Satan, so neither is just or unjust. Job is an innocent bystander in a series of events that he

had no control over. His attempt to make sense of these seemingly unrelated events is a futile exercise.

But that doesn't keep us from trying. We all try to understand why a sequence of events has occurred, that there must be some fate, some master plan that we are unable to see in the present moment. It is certainly the bread and butter of religions. Playing on our desire to know what it is all about, a variety of narratives are offered.

One is that there is a cosmic battle taking place between good and evil. Everything from tsunamis to terrorist attacks to Trump are the weapons of choice to punish the sinful or push the chosen from grace. We certainly see it in the current polarised political environment. Choose your party carefully lest you become part of the forces of evil and are destined to be cast into the fires of hell.

What if all this seriousness is not what it's all about? What if there is no god who is waging a cosmic battle with the forces of evil? What if there is no hidden plan for our lives that we must strive to uncover? What then? Does that mean there is no answer to the question: What is it all about? Perhaps. But then I consider our lives. I consider those who have lived their lives as if it had purpose, as if they had a reason to be here in this time and place.

Choosing from a multitude of examples I offer up Ric Masten. Ric was a poet, song writer, philosopher and a Unitarian minister.

There is much to learn from Ric. After being told he had six months left to live, he spent over ten years dying with prostate cancer. Ric felt that we each have three birthdays. The first happens when we are born. The second happens when we discover we are going to die—and are granted a sense of self and a sense of time as a result. The third happens every time we choose to truly live.

He was committed to the idea that living life fully to our dying breath was what it was all about. He expressed that in one of this congregation's favourite songs, *Let it be a dance*, which is today's closing song. There is a story behind the song. Ric said that he wrote this for Barbara Brussell, a friend of one of his daughters. Barbara was a high school dance student who was seriously injured in a car accident involving a drunk driver that killed her teacher and two of her classmates. Her knee was so badly damaged that it was doubtful that she would ever walk again, let alone dance. He visited her in hospital and bet her that within a year she would come dancing up the road to his home to a song that he would write. The song he wrote within a few days was *Let It Be A Dance*. A year later, she came dancing, limping, but dancing up the road as he played his guitar and sang:

*Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times
And the bad times, too,
Let it be a dance.*

That's what it's all about.

As his death finally approached, Ric wrote his poem End Lines:

I've always been
a yin/yang—front/back—clear/blur
up/down—life/death king of guy
my own peculiar duality being
philosopher slash hypochondriac
win win characteristics
when you've been diagnosed
with advanced prostate cancer
finally the hypochondriac
has more than windmills to tilt with
the philosopher arming himself
with exactly the proper petard
an explosive statement
found an e-mail message
beneath the signature
of a cancer survivor's name
a perfect end line wily and wise
quote: I ask God:
"How much time do I have before I die?"
"Enough to make a difference"

Ric certainly made a difference in this world. He made the world a better place for those who knew him and through his music still does for those of us who didn't. The only way he could have done this was by jumping his whole self into life.

In doing so, Ric invited us to jump with our whole selves into life. Enjoy the heart and marrow of it. All that comes our way: good, bad, or indifferent. It is there for the tasting and it can spur the development of love and compassion in all our days. Even the struggles we face in our lives require nothing less than our whole selves. This is living with integrity. When we do we are deciding we will not just passively accept our destiny as dictated by someone else's rules but rather engage our destiny with our whole lives. We are declaring that our life matters and will make a positive difference to others in their living of theirs.

Begin slowly if you must with just a hand or a foot but at some point we must jump in with our whole selves in order to reap the benefits of living a full and abundant life.

All that silliness of the Hokey Tokey may really be what it's all about.