



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Bending the arc of the universe

Rachel Mackintosh © 14 January 2024

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

“Through the Looking Glass” Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson)

We know, because of science, the enlightenment, telescopes, that compared with us, the universe is big. We may have seen that meme that shows two photos of the Milky Way, one taken before, and one taken after we have made a mistake: clue, it’s the same photo.

My musing today has as its starting point, not Alice, actually, but the quote: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

My sermon topic “Bending the arc of the universe” has taken liberties with the quote already, and may seem arrogant – how could we bend the arc of the universe? – but I am aiming rather for audacious. As Paul said when I sent him my title, “May as well aim big.”

Surely it’s impossible to think that we can have any effect on the arc of the universe? How, when we are beset by our personal concerns, by bereavement, by relationship problems, by money worries, by our grief over floods and landslides, and the interminable, infernal heat of the warming planet; how, then, can we expect to make a difference? Surely it’s impossible. Just one impossible thing to believe before breakfast. Our personal concerns and size of the problems are just two impossibilities.

I’m not the first person to take liberties with the quote. I will take us briefly through the nineteenth century origin of the image, and the 20th century use of it that made it famous.

In 1853, Theodore Parker, Unitarian Minister and prominent Transcendentalist, published a collection of ten sermons, including one that contained the following words: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

Parker was an abolitionist, who called for an end to slavery. At that time, in the mid-nineteenth century, Unitarians were Christians who believed in God. In his sermon, Parker went on to say,

“Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson[, who owned slaves,] trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble.”

Parker was right about that, as the American Civil War was not long in coming. All America did tremble. The arc of the moral universe surely bent towards justice as the outcome of the war saw the abolition of slavery in that country.

Theodore Parker may have believed that God is just, but he didn't just leave it to God. He himself worked tirelessly for the cause. He saw that human endeavour was an essential part of the moral universe.

The Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr is the person who made the quote famous. He took Theodore Parker's image of the arc of the universe and he too, applied it with reference to what humans do. He used the image more than once, and here I quote from an essay he wrote in 1958, more than 100 years after Parker, our Unitarian forebear:

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into AD and BC, so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”
1958 February 8, The Gospel Messenger, Out of the Long Night by Martin Luther King, Jr., Start Page 3, Quote Page 14, Column 1

King's paraphrasing of Parker was punchier, and he crystallised the image into a quote that many people know. His was more a call to arms, and Obama would half a century later have the words woven into a rug in the Oval office. Words to inspire, then. Like Parker, King too saw human endeavour as an essential part of the moral universe. He was a key player in the successful campaign for desegregation in the American south.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

How do these words sit for us, Unitarian Universalists in Aotearoa in 2024? I first heard them used by Clay Nelson, from this pulpit, some time in the past nine years.

They are hopeful words.

For Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, they were firmly rooted in Christian belief. God is just. Christ rises up. And humans are part of the moral universe. Acting from a belief that God is just, humans can contribute to the arc of the moral universe.

For us, without a necessary belief in God, without a belief in a literal resurrection, can we just drop the word moral (as Obama did, incidentally) and carry on? Or is our lack of a belief in God another thing that presents us with the impossibility of bending the arc of the universe? We already have our personal concerns. We already have the size of the problems. Do we also have our lack of a creed? Are we adrift in the moral universe?

I say, “No.”

We may not have a creed, but our faith matters. We are all motivated in some way to be here. Our inspirations may be disparate, for we hold to the principle of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, or to the value of pluralism. However we see that truth or meaning, whatever of various mysteries inspires us, we have come here to be together today in this community.

Clay used to talk about becoming fully human, about our transformation, as individuals and as a community. To be fully human, I say our faith matters. What we do matters. And to be fully human, to exercise our faith, we have to get out of our heads sometimes, and engage with the other things that make us human.

What arrests you? What takes your breath away? What makes you leave your head and pause in wonder? Is it the size of the universe? Is it the perfection of a flower? Is it love? Is it God? Is it the good that people do? The kindness of strangers? Is it walking with frost and fire and death and snow? Is it a forest or an ocean or a tree? Is it a tune or one exquisite note? Is it the beauty of the truth that, at an atomic level, solid things are mostly space? Is it the ungraspable nature of time?

When we can feel our sense of wonder and mystery, and integrate this with our heads and our hearts, we are truly engaged in the project of becoming fully human.

And when we are thus fully human, we have navigated and made possible that impossibility of apprehending the arc of the moral universe without a creed to guide us.

Which leads us to human endeavour. What is to be done?

Both Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King were part of the human endeavour for racial justice. A work in progress.

In Aotearoa right now there is an issue of justice. The arc of moral history had been bending towards justice for te reo Māori. People returning to this country after a few years overseas have often been struck by how much more they encounter te reo on their return. Te reo has been blossoming.

This progress, this arc, now faces a serious threat, with current government coalition agreements committed to minimising te reo, and casting the English language – the most spoken language on the planet – as some kind of victim in need of protection in the form of official status.

To give this threat some context, let's consider the nature of the taonga that is language, that is knowledge.

Those of us who were part of Clay's course on Islam may remember that, during the so-called dark ages, when Western and Northern Europe basically lost all the scientific knowledge of the Greeks and Romans, the universities of the Islamic world kept the knowledge alive. Without that, because of its abandonment in the west, the knowledge could have been lost forever.

In 1907 in New Zealand, an Act of Parliament was passed: the *Tohunga Suppression Act*. The Act forbade the practice of mātauranga Māori, or Māori knowledge, for health or other purposes. The Act didn't call it mātauranga Māori: it called it "pretending to possess supernatural powers in the treatment or cure of any disease or in the foretelling of future events or otherwise ..."

The deliberate suppressing of knowledge in this way – in an oral tradition – could have seen it die out completely if it hadn't simply gone underground.

And having mātauranga Māori driven underground, marginalised, pushed to the side, is just one part of the injustice that persists in this country.

I draw the comparison of that event to what is happening today to illustrate the seriousness. Te reo Māori is not actually banned, but it is being marginalised and pushed to the side. Without support it could so easily wither and perish.

I believe this moment in our history gives us a focus for our human endeavour. We can stand up for te Reo Māori. We can talk about Waka Kotahi and Te Whatu Ora, instead of the New Zealand Transport Agency or Health New Zealand, to keep the knowledge alive. We can support the learning of te Reo for Māori people, and we can learn it ourselves. We can make a simple statement for our congregation: I propose, “Te Reo Māori is welcome here.” We can gather when called. We can make submissions on any plans to marginalise and minimise and otherwise suppress.

Having navigated our impossibilities, having embraced the project of becoming fully human, we can bend the arc of the universe towards justice. And we can start now.

In the words of Joan Baez: “Every day on earth is another chance to get it right.”

So be it.

Meditation / Discussion Questions:-

What makes you pause in wonder?

And what action for justice does this inspire in you?