

"Are You A Flake?"

January 8, 2012

Reverend Alison Hyder

The First Unitarian Church of Wilmington

"Change Alone is Unchanging" - Heraklitos of Ephros

Whoever wishes to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details. Knowledge is not intelligence. In searching for the truth be ready for the unexpected. Change alone is unchanging. The same road goes both up and down. The beginning of a circle is also its end. Not I, but the world says it: All is one. And yet everything comes in season.

"Snowflakes" by Clive Sansom

And did you know
That every flake of snow
That forms so high
In the grey winter sky
And falls so far
Is a bright six-pointed star?
Each crystal grows
A flower as perfect as a rose.
Lace could never make
The patterns of a flake.
No brooch
Of figured silver could approach
Its delicate craftsmanship. And think:

Each pattern is distinct.
Of all the snowflakes floating there -
The million million in the air -
None is the same. Each star
Is newly forged, as faces are,
Shaped to its own design
Like yours and mine.
And yet... each one
Melts when its flight is done;
Holds frozen loveliness
A moment, even less;
Suspends itself in time -
And passes like a rhyme.

READING: by Marci Bauman-Bork, lead psychiatrist at the Menninger Outpatient Center. From "The Problems of Being Perfect" in *Psychiatric News*, May 5, 2000.

I recently experienced a profound and deep revelation. As with a lot of Great Truths, it seemed so obvious once discovered that I couldn't believe I hadn't realized it sooner. My profound new insight, stated simply, is: "Every time I try to be perfect, I am trying to be someone else."

As a psychiatrist, educator, administrator, wife, and mother, I felt there were expectations galore that I must do things absolutely *perfectly*. Millions of others professional women (and men, perhaps, too) no doubt join me in feeling overextended, overcommitted, underexercised, and exhausted. At times we all fall into the trap of being haunted by that primitive mantra: "Just try harder and everything will be perfect."

I began thinking about this dilemma after reading Kathleen Norris's book, *Amazing Grace* (Riverhead Books, 1998), that the word "perfect" didn't originally mean flawless, exact, or unimprovable, as we have come to believe. Instead, its original meaning in Hebrew was "whole," or "complete."

This idea flooded me with relief, much as fresh air strikes a nauseated passenger... *At last*, I thought, *maybe being perfect could mean just being me!* By being more fully myself, I could set a new standard for myself, rather than the traditional idea of being perfect.

SERMON: "Are You a Flake?" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Wilson Bentley was 15 when his mother gave him a microscope. Bentley was born in 1865 near Jericho, Vermont. He was a farmer's son and didn't attend school until he was 14. But there were always books around the house, including a set of encyclopedias. Bentley's mother was a former schoolteacher, and from her he acquired his education, not the least of which was a lively curiosity and a love of nature's minutiae. Feathers,

insects, bits of stone, all excited his interest. By the time he was eight years old he had made a collection of almost every species of fern that grew in Vermont.

But it was snowing on Wilson Bentley's 15th birthday, so he used his new present to look at a snowflake. In the fleeting moment before it melted, he glimpsed its six points, the intricacies of its patterns. That day excited a passion that never subsided. By twenty the farm boy had perfected a technique for photographing snow crystals. His father and brother couldn't understand why he "fussed over snowflakes." In fact, the whole town thought he was kind of flakey, himself. But during the next 50 years, Wilson Bentley took over 5,381 photomicrographs - enlarged pictures - of snowflakes. He eventually published a book of his photographs and late in life gained a worldwide reputation as an expert on the meteorology of snow. Now his snow pictures have been made into jewelry, and have a website of their own. [paraphrased from Chet Raymo, *Honey From Stone*; see also snowflakebentley.com]

Bentley was a dairy farmer, an amateur meteorologist, but he was still a man of science. He knew that each photograph was an addition to our knowledge. But his passion was also grounded in the mystery of the universe, a foundation for order and variation that was, he said, "more beautiful than ever [was] pictured in our dreams, or in our most extravagant flights of fancy."

In all his photographs of snowflakes Bentley never found two alike. In fact, he was the first to recognize and catalogue this fact. Bentley said, "Every crystal was a masterpiece of design; no one design was ever repeated. When a snowflake melted, that design was forever lost. Just that much beauty was gone, without leaving any record behind." [*The Snowflake Man: A Biography of Wilson A. Bentley*, by Duncan C. Blanchard]. This is what stunned and motivated him, the tremendous balance of order and wanton, casual beauty.

Whatever their pattern and variety, all snow crystals are six-sided. This fact had intrigued the German astronomer Johannes Kepler. In 1610 Kepler wrote a book called *The Six-Cornered Snowflake*, the first recorded mathematical theory of natural form, as a gift to his patron at the Imperial Court. This is from Chet Raymo's book, *Honey From Stone*. (*I recommend all of Raymo's books to you. He is a scientific mystic, and a wonderful writer*)

Why, asks Kepler in his little treatise, do snowflakes fall as six-cornered starlets, "tufted like feathers?" There must be a cause, he asserts, for if it happens by chance, then why don't snowflakes fall with five corners or with seven? Casting about for an answer, Kepler considers other hexagons in nature: the shape of a cell in a honeycomb, for example. He shows that a hexagonal architecture exactly suits the bee's purpose, for (as Kepler proves) the hexagon is the geometrical figure that enables the bee to enclose a maximum amount of honey with a minimum of wax.... Next Kepler considers the seeds of the pomegranate, which are also hexagonal in form. He demonstrates that this is the shape any round, pliable object will take if a mass of such objects is squeezed equally from every side into a minimal volume, as the seeds of the pomegranate are squeezed together by the growing fruit.... Then Kepler reviews other possible "causes" for the snowflake's six-sided elegance: formal causes, teleological causes, efficient causes. He considers the role of beauty, function, and necessity. Perhaps, Kepler muses somewhat whimsically, like Olympian athletes snowflakes take care "not to fall in an ugly or immodest fashion." Or maybe, he concludes, in making snowflakes, nature simply "plays."

...At the end of his little book, Kepler confesses his ignorance and leaves the problem of the snowflake's symmetry to future generations of natural philosophers.

The riddle of the snowflake has since been partly solved. Physicists have traced the snowflake's six-sided secret down into the heart of matter, to the form of the water molecule, and, ultimately, to the laws of atomic bonding that give the water molecule its shape.

Water, Raymo explains, is a combination of an atom of oxygen linked with two atoms of hydrogen in a regular hexagonal lattice. That forms the foundation for the shape of a snowflake. But their growth as crystals has an element of randomness that gives them their individuality:

...The crystals [alighting on my sleeve] began their growth on a nucleus of wind-borne dust (every snowflake has at its center an invisible grain of dust, a heart of stone), and fell once, twice, three times,

or more, gathering weight, and were lifted again by the updrafts of the easterly wind, each time acquiring new dendretic fingerings, branches, featherings.

Snowflakes look stable, says Raymo, but at the atomic level they are a frenzy of activity, as the water shifts and electronic bonds between molecules are made and broken a million times a second. Faults in the crystal jump from place to place and are repaired. "And somehow," he says,

in the midst of this atomic caprice, the snowflake acquires and retains an ordered form. We are in the face of one of nature's most profound mysteries: how beauty and structure arise from a delicate balance of order and disorder.

...Physicists are content that they can explain the hexagonal symmetry of the crystals, but they can say very little about the delicacy of the branching and the extraordinary congruity of the six points.... It is clear that particles of airborne dust provide the nuclei about which snowflake crystals grow. Without dust there would be no snow....

Wilson Bentley photographed over 5,000 snowflakes and found no two identical. But, Raymo says, there are 5,000 snowflakes in just a swipe of snow, and 10 million to a cup. The amount of flakes that can fall in just one hour is staggering. Meteorologists think that there are one trillion, trillion, trillion different types of snowflakes. The chances of two snowflakes being exactly alike are about one million trillion (that is a 10 followed by 17 zeros).

It kind of makes us humans seem commonplace.

But of course, we too, despite our similarities of form and habit are unique, individual, each with our own distinct history and experience, with secret dreams and a journey that is only ours to lead. It doesn't matter if we wear the same styles or drink the same cola or clone ourselves either figuratively or literally. No one else can tell us how we should feel or what we need to know to tend our soul's deepest impulse. That is our right.

But it is also our responsibility. What defined the Protestant Movement when it broke off from the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century was its claim that individuals had a direct relationship to God. We didn't need priests to intercede for us. Luther believed in the priesthood of all believers, men and women alike, to bear witness to the gospel. They could read the Bible for themselves. And if there were still bishops and theologians telling us what to believe, well, it wasn't long before people were calling their own ministers and directing parish affairs.

Some people believe the Protestant Reformation was the beginning of the cult of individuality, the emphasis on personal salvation and achievement over communal values that would flower during the Enlightenment and reach its apex in the United States of America. And it is true that Americans have had fewer boundaries and structures to maintain traditional community relationships. There is more mobility and less feudalism. But at the same time, Americans depended upon their neighbors to help bring in the hay, defend their communities, and organize dances. Americans founded their own school systems and activities and unions. We have always had a higher rate of volunteerism than in other countries, where governments are more paternal. Here people have always believed that they could make a difference in the world around them. It is not just individualism, it is empowerment.

It is exhausting, too.

e.e. cummings said, "Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people: but whenever you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself. To be nobody-but-yourself - in a world that is doing its best, night and day, trying to make you everybody else - means to fight the hardest battle any human being can ever fight; and never stop fighting." He's writing about poetry, about being a poet, but he might just as easily be talking about faith. Cummings was raised a Unitarian and he knew the struggle to find values that would hold him and challenge him.

The answer, for cummings, was not in dogma or in facts, but in feelings. The heart of creative expression, of individuality, is in one's experience of the world, just as a snowflake is shaped by the pressures of temperature and air current and emerges complex and unique.

He's talking about trust, I think. Trust in change, in human resilience and fortitude, but most of all trust in our own inherent worth. And that is the heart of Unitarian Universalism. You must discern your own perspective, your own feelings, a particular and vivid relationship to the mysteries of the universe. You are charged with your own journey of redemption. You must figure out how to offer up your specific gifts in service to others, your own crystalline beauty.

Psychiatrist Marci Bauman-Bork tried to do it all, to be a perfect mother, wife, and doctor. She still felt inadequate. But, as she discovered, "the word 'perfect' didn't originally mean flawless, exact, or unimprovable, as we have come to believe. Instead, its original meaning in Hebrew was 'whole,' or 'complete.'" She recalls, "This idea flooded me with relief, much as fresh air strikes a nauseated passenger.... *At last*, I thought, *maybe being perfect could mean just being me!* By being more fully myself, I could set a new standard for myself, rather than the traditional idea of being perfect." For, as she said, "Every time I try to be perfect, I am trying to be someone else."

To be nobody but yourself - to trust who you are, flakey, remorseful, proud - is difficult. You have to develop your own beliefs and practices listen to your doubts, the ideas of others, examine your feelings, and reject old patterns and beliefs. Know what you claim, and why. It's not easy, and it sure isn't quick. But no one else can do it for you.

Some of you come here scarred by rejection or shame. You are struggling to be patient and understanding when you just want to scream. Perhaps you're overwhelmed and angry. You have made mistakes and hurt others. You have lost your trust in God or in yourself. How can you contribute anything if you believe that at your core is something wicked and unyielding and soiled? You feel unworthy of grace, and yet you long for forgiveness.

We can't give you absolution for your sins. Here at this church there is nothing to memorize, no guarantee of salvation. And yet we have faith that even a flawed and imperfect foundation can be the basis for a life of dignity and worth. Thornton Wilder said, "In love's service, only the wounded can serve." Only those who have felt hurt and sorrow and guilt have hearts deep enough, open enough, strong enough, to risk giving of themselves. Only they can dare to be different. At the core of a snowflake is a heart of stone, and yet from it, from the dust and dirt, buffeted by winds, forms something complex and perfect and individual in its own beauty.

Wilson Bentley never married. His lady friends always knew that his passion for snowflakes would be his first love. But he was an affectionate uncle, a good friend and neighbor. He played piano in a band and only once left Vermont, when he was invited to study the snow in Canada. While Jericho never quite knew what to make of him, he published over 60 articles and scientific papers on his observations of snowflakes and rain patterns. He said, "From the practical standpoint I suppose I would be considered a failure. It has cost me \$15,999 in time and materials to do the work and I have received less than \$4,000 for it."

Bentley died of pneumonia in 1931, just a few months after his book of snowflake photographs was published. In his obituary, the *Burlington Free Press* wrote, "He saw something in the snowflakes which other men failed to see, not because they could not see, but because they had not the patience and understanding to look."

From the smallest snowflake, to the largest problems of justice and equity, the world calls for your response. No one else will do. Only you can find the answer to the dreaming within your soul.

Are you a flake? The chances are infinite.

CLOSING WORDS: by Nikki Giovanni "Winter Poem"

once a snowflake fell
on my brow and i loved
it so much i kissed
it and it was happy and called its cousins
and brothers and a web

of snow engulfed me then
i reached to love them all
and i squeezed them and they became
a spring rain and i stood perfectly
still and was a flower.