

**Black Swans and the Congregation**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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Ministry is a response to the inward longings of our hearts, and ministry is a response to the outward social dynamics arising from our longings. Our lives are an interplay of inward longing and outward collective expression of longing. Both clergy and lay people engage in ministry. Last month, the Board of Trustees and the Committee on Ministry met on a fine Saturday morning to grapple with what shared ministry actually looks like and might feel like and should be like in this congregation.

This group of leaders wants to keep what is energizing and meaningful in congregational life and to shed what is draining and superficial. One focus of attention will be a revisiting of the congregation's mission. Why are we here? This is a fine place to meet compatible people and to enhance one's social life. That is great! Social life enhancement is necessary but not sufficient for a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

This liberal religious congregation is a terrarium of sorts. It is a container for protecting seedlings while we grow large enough and mature enough to impact the ecosystem outside these walls. This congregation is a greenhouse. Our destiny is not to thrive inside this greenhouse but to take our chances outside this greenhouse.

The world outside the greenhouse of the congregation is Extremistan, not Mediocristan, according to Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Extremistan and Mediocristan are made-up names for two world views. His book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, is a *New York Times* bestseller. Nassim Taleb has been called the hottest thinker in the world. “[Taleb is] a genuinely significant philosopher . . . someone who is able to change the way we view the structure of the world through the strength, originality and veracity of his ideas alone,” writes one reviewer.

This morning I will tease out some shared ministry implications of the ideas of this hottest thinker in the world. First, about the title, *The Black Swan*. Before the discovery of Australia,

all swans were white. All evidence confirmed the fact that all swans were white. This was Mediocristan, where evidence was tightly and neatly distributed around a data point. But, as Nassim Taleb reminds us, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There were black swans in Australia. In Mediocristan, black swans are outliers and are generally ignored. In Extremistan, black swans exist.

What we do not know, what we have not seen – they might be very different from what we do know and what we have seen. These huge, stunning surprises are Black Swan Events. “The metaphor of the black swan is not at all a modern one . . . I selected it because it corresponds to the ancient idea of a ‘rare bird.’ The Latin poet Juvenal refers to a ‘bird as rare as the black swan . . . “<sup>1</sup> He continues, “I stick my neck out and make a claim, against many of our habits of thought, that our world is dominated by the extreme, the unknown, and the very improbable (improbable according to our current knowledge) – and all the while we spend our time engaged in small talk, focusing on the known, and the repeated. This implies the need to use the extreme event as a starting point and not treat it as an exception to be pushed under the rug.”<sup>2</sup>

The future will be less predictable than the present. We should use the extreme event as a starting point. Consider the turkey. Every day of its life, food is plentiful. Life is good. There is not a lot to do, just mill around, vocalizing a gobble here and a gobble there. Just like clockwork, food appears, then more food appears. Then it is a waddle here and a waddle there. Another day arrives, along with more food. Life is good. Then, one day, life is not so good. In fact, life is over, and the turkey never saw it coming.

The turkey problem is our problem. We live in Extremistan, a land where highly improbable and consequential events occur. Expect them. To the extent possible, protect yourself against the highly improbable negative event, and position yourself to benefit from the highly improbable positive event. We can do that as individuals, and we can do that as a congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Random House Trade Paperback, New York, 2010, p. xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> Page xxii.

Nassim Taleb's ability to notice how often the extreme event shapes history began in his youth. He grew up in Lebanon, a country which for hundreds of years has been home to many ethnic and religious groups. A sophisticated, cosmopolitan culture emerged. Life was good. Life was good until it wasn't. A brutal civil war broke out and claimed countless lives over a 15-year period. It came out of left field. Teenager Nassim Taleb noticed that no one predicted it beforehand, yet plenty of people looked backward and created a narrative of causation.

"History is opaque. You see what comes out, not the script that produces events, the generator of history," Nassim Taleb writes.<sup>3</sup> "Who predicted the rise of Christianity as a dominant religion in the Mediterranean basin, and later in the Western world? . . . How about that competing religion that emerged seven centuries later; who forecast that a collection of horsemen would spread their empire and Islamic law from the Indian subcontinent to Spain in just a few years?"<sup>4</sup>

Recent events convince me that I live in Extremistan, where Black Swan Events (highly improbable consequential events) occur. In preparation for last night's annual goods and services auction fundraiser which was masquerade-themed this year, I found a glittery gold and black beaded dress. I bought my first ever high heeled shoes. I teetered and tottered on them for an hour before changing into comfortable shoes. Adrienne probably saved my life by steadying me as I clumped down the steps on the stage. Wearing high heeled shoes was a Black Swan Event for me.

Another Black Swan Event in my life is this: I have taken up boxing. [Put on boxing gloves.] I posted a photo on Facebook. The photo shows my boxing gloves next to a vase of cut flowers, under a beautiful calligraphy message which says, "Welcome and Peace." I call this image of welcome, peace, flowers, and gloves, "Still Life with Boxing Gloves." A friend who knows me very well posted a comment under the photo: "Would not have predicted that." A Black Swan Event, indeed.

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<sup>3</sup> Page 8.

<sup>4</sup> Page 11.

Taking up boxing would not have been predicted looking forward, yet looking backward, it is easy to explain. I wanted extra cardiovascular exercise in the approaching food-centered holiday season. I do not jog or run, and walking briskly on the treadmill is unbearably tedious. I saw boxing instructor Ernie sparring with clients in a small space in the middle of my gym. Out of the corner of my eye, I had been watching him train middle aged women who seemed to enjoy it and who certainly received a cardio workout. If they can do it, why can't I?

Something prospectively improbable turns out to be easily explicable, looking backward. I am still learning the basics, so the sparring is choreographed. Later it will be free form. Now Ernie tells me what kind of punch to use and where to aim. "Give me two jabs, a right, left hook . . . Bob and weave right, right, two jabs." Now we are working on moving forward and backward and around in a circle while doing this. Less often now Ernie has to say, "Your OTHER right" or "Your OTHER left."

At the last session, Ernie said, "Go out and buy a mouth guard – that thing that goes in your mouth to protect your teeth from impact. I looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights. "No, no, I'm not going to punch you in the face. I've had clients get so excited that they hit themselves in the teeth." So now I have a mouth guard to protect me from myself.

Congregational life takes place in Extremistan. This is a small congregation. Every person who joins brings the potential for a Black Swan Event. Every person who leaves brings the potential for a Black Swan Event. Our official membership hovers around 120, but that number disguises the volatility that characterizes congregational life. Next year, we will celebrate the congregation's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we will look for the narrative line of our past. What we come to understand about our past, however, does not constrain our future because we live in Extremistan, where highly improbable consequential events take place.

I credit several highly improbable consequential events with keeping Unitarian Universalism alive. The impact of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists kept us going in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The generosity of Carolyn Veatch and the Veatch Fund has kept Unitarian Universalism going in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What a Black Swan Event! Who could have imagined

that donated shares of stock relating to oil found under the North Sea would have had such a positive impact on Unitarian Universalism.

What are some implications of Black Swan Events for this congregation? A congregation is a complex system. Complex systems thrive due to slack and redundancy, not through optimization and debt, claims Nassim Taleb. It is fine to work toward coordination of effort, but we should welcome slack and redundancy in congregational life. Do not leave all social action to the Social Action Committee. Do not leave all religious education to the Religious Education Council. Do not imagine that the knitting group is comprised of a bunch of slackers. Do not imagine that the most exhausted member is the member who contributes the most. Just because membership in the congregation has hovered around 120 in the past does not mean that it will hover there in the future.

We can position ourselves to make the most out of positive Black Swan Events. “Black Swans being unpredictable, we need to adjust to their existence (rather than naively try to predict them). There are so many things we can do if we focus on antiknowledge, or what we do not know. Among many other benefits, you can set yourself up to collect serendipitous Black Swans (of the positive kind) by maximizing your exposure to them,” writes Nassim Taleb.<sup>5</sup> Go to parties! That is his advice because conversations with others sets up the potential for a positive Black Swan Event.

One example of a positive Black Swan Event is Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Thandeka’s “We Love Beyond Belief” program. If you attended the recent Council of Chairs meeting, you heard about the program. At this afternoon’s Board meeting, the Board will decide whether to run with it and, if so, whether to run with it early in 2012 or late in 2012. The program is designed to increase the amount of spiritual energy in the congregation. “We Love Beyond Belief” is designed to encourage the religiously liberal expression of human emotion. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to work with this Unitarian Universalist luminary.

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<sup>5</sup> Page xxv.

I conclude with 10 of Nassim Taleb's principles for supporting health and robustness:<sup>6</sup>

- 1) What is fragile should break early, while it's still small.
- 2) No socialization of losses and privatization of gain.
- 3) People who were driving a school bus blindfolded (and crashed it) should never be given a new bus.
- 4) Don't let someone making an "incentive" bonus manage a nuclear plant – or your financial risks. They might cut corners on safety.
- 5) Compensate complexity with simplicity.
- 6) Do not give children dynamite sticks, even if the dynamite sticks come with a warning label.
- 7) Only Ponzi schemes should depend on confidence.
- 8) Do not give an addict more drugs if he has withdrawal pains.
- 9) Citizens should not depend on financial assets as a repository of values.
- 10) Make an omelet with broken eggs.

May our omelets be tasty. May we serve them to friends and strangers alike, for the strangers of today may be the friends of tomorrow.

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<sup>6</sup> Page 368.