

**“Mixing It Up”**  
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The road to insight is rarely straightforward, wide, well paved, and well lighted. In my experience, the road to insight is more often difficult to discern, decorated by rocky obstacles, lengthened by switchbacks, and poorly lit. I am happy to say that the actual road to insight is much more interesting to travel than the idealized road of fantasy. This morning, I will share with you insights from my recent reflection on the spiritual significance of blended families.

Reflecting on the spiritual significance of blended families led me deeper into the territory of chance and intention. The Rick Steves’ Lonely Planet Guide to the territory of chance and intention has not yet been published. I recommend the trip for the adventurous and for the bored. Group tours are also available; this congregation would not be the first to travel as a group.

From a spiritual or religious point of view, what is the nature of reality? How might its dynamics be described in words and images? Reality seems to me to be a fascinating interplay between chance and intention. Chance lures forward intention, and each intention reveals additional opportunities for chance. Past interplays between chance and intention set up the present moment. The present moment is our moment to express our religious breadth and depth by how consciously and skillfully we embrace *both* chance and intention. Together this polarity forms a dynamic unity. To emphasize one side of the polarity at the expense of the other is to risk a diminished life.

Parents understand that raising children involves both chance and intention. The hopes and dreams of parents for their children do not automatically come true. The hopes and dreams of children for their own lives do not automatically come true. Intention has limits. Chance, too, has its limits. We are not helpless dry leaves blown hither and yon by winds of fate. Our intentions matter in shaping our lives as individuals and in groups. Adoptive parents dramatically shift the quality of life possible for the children they adopt and shift the quality of life for themselves. They take a stand against unchecked chance and use intention to nurture more love in the world.

I will return to the spiritual significance of blended families in a moment, but first I turn to literary morsels that highlight the role of chance in our lives. These literary tidbits stand in for all the ways that chance shapes our lives. When and where we were conceived, when and where we were born, our parents, social and economic class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, field of work – chance plays a role in all of these facets of identity. Chance plays a remarkable role in the development of language and colloquial expressions. As I unpack the following words and phrases, let your mind wander to the ways that chance has impacted your life.

Tis the season. For holiday buffs, tis the season to feel sentimental, relishing in traditions burnished over time, keeping mum about which gifts are destined for which recipients. Showing their true colors, holiday buffs go the distance in a marathon of socializing and gift giving. For others, those would-be teetotalers and smart alecks, tis the season to wait with bated breath until the season is over, avoiding the brouhaha of malls filled with Teddy bears. Since time immemorial, there has been tension between those who would go cold turkey if they could, perhaps as a means to make ends meet, and those who might uncharitably be called Goody Two Shoes, who adore the season.

“A buff is a person whose chosen interest is a serious but amateur pursuit . . . In New York, in the burgeoning days of firefighting (the early 1800s), men adopted the practice of following fire engines to the scenes of major blazes to watch the firefighters extinguish the flames . . . During the icy New York winters, they wore buffalo fur to keep warm: the firefighters nicknamed them ‘buffaloes,’ which was shortened to ‘buffs.’”<sup>1</sup> These and the other explanations come from Harry Oliver’s book *Flying by the Seat of Your Pants: Surprising Origins of Everyday Expressions*.

“The phrase ‘keep mum’ has nothing to do with mothers . . . Mum is merely the spelling chosen to represent the only sound it is possible for a person to make if their mouth is tightly shut – the

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<sup>1</sup> *Flying by the Seat of Your Pants: Surprising Origins of Everyday Expressions*, Harry Oliver, A Perigee Book, published by the Penguin Group, New York, 2008, p. 192

unintelligible ‘Mmmm.’ It has been around for over 500 years and its meaning has not changed.”<sup>2</sup> “The phrase [true colors] derives from an early use of ‘colors’ to mean flag, pennant, or badge. Warships often carried the flags of many nations on board so that they could craftily mislead and elude the enemy . . . If a ship carried many flags, it could deceitfully hail another ship by flying one flag and then hoisting their own once they were in firing range, thus showing their true colors and catching the enemy off guard.”<sup>3</sup>

“The battle of Marathon in 490 BC was a crucial point in Greek history . . . The Greek soldier Phidippides was dispatched to run the grueling 26 mile journey [from Marathon bay] to Athens to warn against the impending Persian assault.”<sup>4</sup> On one occasion, the English reformed alcoholic Richard ‘Dicky’ Turner happened to stutter. “One day, while speaking on the subject [of total abstinence], he stuttered on the word ‘t-t-total’ and, since he was such an extreme advocate of temperance, the mistake was seized upon by the congregation and became the word to define an abstainer.”<sup>5</sup>

The first Smart Alec was Alec Hoag, who lived in New York in the 1840’s and was a very clever and successful thief. “Along with his wife, Miranda, who was a prostitute, an accomplice named French Jack, and two corrupt policemen, Mr. Hoag conducted many a petty theft using his beautiful wife to distract his unsuspecting victims while he picked their pockets and handed the loot to French Jack. The police officers were paid to turn a blind eye.”<sup>6</sup>

“Bated breath” appears in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice. Bated is short for abated or stopped. Brouhaha was borrowed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the French. “It often appeared in 16<sup>th</sup> century French dramas as the devil’s cry, announcing his arrival in scenes . . . [it] derives from the Hebrew for ‘welcome,’ barukh habba . . . A reasonable explanation of the choice of ‘brouhahah’ as the devil’s cry is that it was an act of anti-Semitism, all too common at the time.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Page 142.

<sup>3</sup> Page 48.

<sup>4</sup> Page 69.

<sup>5</sup> Page 15.

<sup>6</sup> Page 126.

<sup>7</sup> Page 149.

Regarding Teddy bears, “In 1902 Theodore ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt went to Mississippi to settle a border dispute between Mississippi and Louisiana. To take a break from the negotiations, a hunting trip was organized and, on this trip, members of the party tied a bear cub to a tree and invited the president to finish the animal off. Roosevelt refused because he felt it was unsportsmanlike. The story got out and, the next day, political cartoonist Clifford Berryman drew a worthy Roosevelt refusing to shoot a cute, defenseless bear.”<sup>8</sup>

Time immemorial is a lot more precise than I ever dreamed. “It originates to 1275 CE, when the year 1189 (when Richard I acceded to the throne) was set as being the time beyond which no one could remember. From then on, no legal cases could deal with events before that.”<sup>9</sup>

Cold turkey refers to the goose bumps that appear on the body of an addict who stops using heroin.<sup>10</sup> To make ends meet refers to accounting ledgers and the hopes that income recorded in one column will stretch as far down the page as expenses in the next column.<sup>11</sup> Oliver Goldsmith is alleged to have written a story which appeared in 1765 about a destitute girl who wanders the streets of London with only one shoe on. Eventually she is given a new pair of shiny shoes. “Delighted by the gift, she shows her joy by exclaiming ‘Two shoes! Two shoes!’”<sup>12</sup>

Noticing the influence of chance on our language can help us appreciate the impact of chance on our lives. Needless to say, chance is not always harmful or negative. Chance can bring blessings into our lives. Chance encounters can lead to happy relationships. Making room for chance occurrences in our lives opens the possibility of positive “Black Swan” events, to use the phrase of Nassim Taleb, whose perspective we explored in a recent Sunday service.

If we squeeze chance to the margins of our lives, if we always take the same route to work or to school or to home, we deepen the rut that steers us into boredom and narrowness. There is a

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<sup>8</sup> Page 85.

<sup>9</sup> Page 129.

<sup>10</sup> Page 117

<sup>11</sup> Page 186.

<sup>12</sup> Page 164.

reason that “control freak” is not a compliment. The new, the fresh -- the newly integrated, the freshly intuited -- tends not to emerge in a cellblock. This holiday season as we venture into gatherings large and small, we do well to take our foot off the “control” pedal.

Yet the chance/intention polarity of reality encourages us not to rely solely or even predominantly upon chance for wellbeing. Our intentions matter. The intentions of others matter. The intentions of this congregation matter. We can forgive harsh or clumsy words if we assume or learn of the speaker’s positive intentions. Lighting the chalice at the beginning of worship helps us set an intention for the coming service.

Intentions shape reality by bringing into consciousness our aspirations. For me, religion is about making myself a better person and making the world a better place. We gather in congregations to make ourselves better people and to make the world a better place. We have happily diverging ideas about what that might look like and how to make progress toward that. However, it helps to keep that intention in consciousness, avoiding behavior that is ornamentation, fluff, and façade.

To strengthen intention, it helps to involve the senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, movement. The beauty of flowers and fabric, the sound of a chime or chant, the smell of incense or bread baking, swaying bodies or hands clapping – each of these experiences can strengthen intention if we let them. For those of us who get around by a car, here is a simple way to strengthen intention. Every time you put the key into the ignition and every time you remove the key from the ignition, pause for a moment and ask yourself, “How am I about to make myself a better person and make the world a better place?” You do not have to answer yourself, but let the question linger in the air for a moment.

To conclude, tis the season. The cultural expectation is that we will be with family over the holidays or at least check in with them if we have family. Ghosts of holidays past mingle with hopes of holidays present. Grief muscles its way into the empty chair. The gift no longer necessary to buy may remind us of loss.

Tis the season when relationships in all their gory glory are front and center. For some people, the ties that bind cut off circulation. Others would give almost anything to experience the relational closeness of ties that bind. Desires for mirth twist into doubts about worth as jolly gatherings are viewed from outside. Good cheer and loneliness embrace like the red and white spiral of a candy cane.

Tis the season to reflect on family – not family as a closed unit but family as a network of relationships that we are always in the process of making and remaking. This week, the Pew Research Center, which tracks social and demographic trends, released a study concluding that barely half of the adults in this country (51%) are married, which is a record low.<sup>13</sup> Today, half of Americans are poor or low income, a shameful statistic that demonstrates the urgency of making ourselves better people and making the world a better place.

Today, there is a surge in multi-generational households due to the poor economy, job loss, home foreclosure, and underemployment.<sup>14</sup> Families are always in the process of making and remaking. Surviving veterans of the long war in Iraq will be home for the holidays. Iraqis who survived the war will do their best to recreate their society. Those on all sides of the war who did not survive will be mourned this season and into the future. Families are always in the process of making and unmaking.

May we remember that “family” is more process than product. Blended families show us the way. Adoptive families show us the way. The finest families are ones where there is always room for someone else at the table. The finest families are not limited by biological DNA or cultural DNA. Love makes the finest families into mixtures of blood relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Love makes “stranger” a temporary status. Loving intention holds out welcoming arms to greet the next treasure that chance brings home.

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/>.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/03/fighting-poverty-in-a-bad-economy-americans-move-in-with-relatives/>.

May loving intention and openness to chance be ours now and always. May we “mix it up” as we become better people and help shape the world into a better place. May it be so!