

“Lessons from Dr. Seuss”  
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I’m going to ask you to try something. Think back to your childhood, and remember, if you can, and I hope you can, a time when you had fun. Plain and simple fun. How about a time when your imagination could take you anywhere, in your play or simply in your mind? Here’s another question. What did you want to be when you grew up? Did you follow that dream? Or did you discover another path? Or are you still waiting to find out what you’re going to be when you grow up?? ☺

I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade when I read my first Dr. Seuss book, One Fish, Two Fish. It was the first book on the classroom bookshelves I had learned to read, and by the end of the school year, I had read every book on those shelves. I credit Dr. Seuss with helping me to discover that I loved reading.

The chanting rhythm of his rhymes drew me in, as they did for millions of other children, including my own children a generation later, and the Dr. Seuss books are still just as popular as they were then. And the pictures! No one had ever seen such wacky illustrations. What fun they were to pore over, all the strange-looking characters in the fantasy world Dr. Seuss created.

I’m going to go out on a limb here and speculate that a Unitarian Universalist congregation is probably the only place where quotations from a children’s author, never mind Dr. Seuss, would be used as the day’s reading. But this is one of the freedoms we enjoy as Unitarian Universalists. Ours is a living tradition; revelation is not sealed. So we may draw our inspiration from many sources, including words and deeds of prophetic women and men.

Dr. Seuss, a prophet?

I’m sure he never would have called himself a prophet, but I think it’s fair to say that Dr. Seuss, whose real name was Theodor Seuss Geisel, was a kind of prophet, who is someone regarded as an inspired teacher.

The book, One Fish, Two Fish has what one bookseller generously calls a “freewheeling plot,” but Dr. Seuss’s books always have a message, although Geisel never hit you over the head with it.

After Geisel’s death in 1991, a collection of Seuss quotes was compiled and published in book form and called, Seussisms. His widow wrote in the introduction, “How would he feel about a collection of his ‘wisdom’? I can’t say for certain, but I think Ted would have been surprised as well as humbled, and then really quite pleased. After all, his books contain more sane, sensible, and just plain hilarious advice for living than most of the self-help books crowding bookstores today.”

Most of you are probably familiar with some of Dr. Seuss’s books. His books make people of all ages smile, and are renowned for injecting “exuberance, wonder, thoughtfulness and understanding into the lives of their readers” (publishers, Seussisms).

I don’t know where Geisel’s primary sources of inspiration came from; I suspect he simply drew from the world around him. In the post-World War II years, the advances of science and medicine led to optimism about human potential. And I get the sense that for Geisel, imbuing young readers with a feeling of optimism about their own futures and their own potentials, was an important goal.

So, this morning, I’d like to lift up three “teachings,” if you will, from Dr. Seuss and how they may relate to our lives, whatever age we are. They are self-determination, uniqueness of the individual and, last but not least, the highly underrated value of fun.

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who’ll decide where to go...”

Dr. Seuss is talking about self-determination, the understanding that we have responsibility for setting the course of our own lives. Self-determination is a combination of attitudes and abilities that enables us to set goals for ourselves, and to take the initiative to reach those goals. It’s about knowing what we can control and what is beyond our control.

For example, we can “decide where to go,” but we’re not in control of how things turn out, so we “know what we know” –no more and no less. From there, rather

than expecting a certain outcome, it's helpful to try to be open to whatever happens, to have high hopes but no expectations. Self-determination, as I understand it, means making our own choices, learning to effectively solve problems, and making the quality of our lives our number one goal. Saying, "My life and my happiness are my top priorities."

Does that sound selfish? What is the purpose of our lives, anyway? Shouldn't we be self-sacrificing, and place others' needs before our own? Many people have tried this approach to life, and have ultimately found that they became empty inside. They had no idea who they were, how they felt, what they liked or disliked. So, as selfish as it may sound, WE need to make the quality of our lives our top priority, because no one else can do that for us, AND if we are going to be any good to anyone else, we have to be good to ourselves first.

How do we "decide where to go" with our lives? We make hundreds of decisions about our lives every day, most of them small ones and occasionally some big ones. How do we make those decisions? We may look inside, and listen for a still, small voice. For some of us, when we feel a sense of peace, we know that we've made the right decision. It may be worth asking questions like, "Am I making this decision based on fear, or on faith?" "Am I running away, or running toward?" And sometimes we don't get any clear indication so we just make a choice and see what happens next!

Practicing self-determination also means we experience the consequences of making choices. I sometimes call myself a recovering perfectionist, because there was a time when, if I had made a choice that led to an outcome I was unhappy with, I could metaphorically kick myself for weeks. It took me a long time to understand that, at any given time, I make the best decision I can, based on who I am and what I know right now. If things don't turn out the way I had hoped, instead of getting down on myself, I can turn that energy, which is really wasted energy, toward looking at the situation to see what I might be able to learn from it and toward simply accepting what happened and moving on as best I can.

Self-determination isn't the same as being absolutely independent or living in isolation. It's a way of empowering ourselves to make our own decisions about the course of our lives, making one adjustment after another as reality unfolds. It takes patience, and it takes a lot of courage. As Dr. Seuss advises, "...remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act. And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  percent guaranteed!)"

About the uniqueness of every individual, Dr. Seuss has this to say: “Today you are you, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.”

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles remind us that we have inherent worth and value because of the unique individuals we are. We are all part of the human race, and therefore share what it means to be human, but each of us is also one-of-a-kind. You are unique. You are special. You are loved.

So what do we do with this? Do we strut around saying, “Hey, everybody! I’m unique! I’m special! I’m loved!” Um, well, we COULD, but...

Each of us has a combination of talents, gifts, skills, experiences, and personality traits unlike anyone else’s that, I believe, are meant to be shared with the world. I believe that life’s purpose is, first, to be the best human beings we can be, and second, to give of ourselves to the world.

“Why fit in when you were born to stand out?” says Dr. Seuss.

Fitting in, like most of us tried to do when we were in junior high school, is a lot safer than standing out. Standing out is inherently risky. It takes courage to stand apart from the status quo, to speak your mind, to do what is right, to give freely and passionately of ourselves to the world.

Theodor Geisel was a strong promotor of the idea that learning should be fun. “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more place you’ll go.”

I’m reminded of John Holt, an educator and reformer who taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade and also spent time with 1 and 2-year-olds. Holt was struck by the curiosity, boldness and eagerness of the young children in contrast to the 5<sup>th</sup> graders who, despite their rich backgrounds and high IQs were, with few exceptions, frightened, timid, evasive, and self-protecting. Holt came to the conclusion that the primary reason children did not learn in schools was fear: fear of getting the wrong answers, fear of being ridiculed by the teacher and classmates, fear of not being good enough.

At first, Holt was excited by the possibilities he saw for reforming the educational system. He proposed changes that he believed would reduce the fear among the children and would, instead, make learning enjoyable and fun. But, each time he presented his proposals to educational administrators, he heard, over and over again, “Life isn’t supposed to be fun. It’s hard work, and the sooner the students

come to understand that, the better.” Holt became disillusioned with traditional education. He wrote several books, including, Why Children Fail and How Children Learn and eventually became a proponent of homeschooling.

I read Holt’s books about 20 years ago, and I actually homeschooled my kids for a number of years. Reading about the attitude that Holt ran into, that life isn’t fun, so kids might as well get used to it, made a strong impression on me. I mean, how depressing is that?

Dr. Seuss’s books fly in the face of the notion that life is not supposed to be enjoyable. This, from One Fish, Two Fish:

Did you ever fly a kite in bed?  
Did you ever walk with ten cats on your head?  
Did you ever milk this kind of cow?  
Well, we can do it. We know how.  
If you never did you should. These things are fun and fun is good.

Geisel once said in an interview, “I like nonsense. It wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living. It’s a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope.”

There is a Zen saying which goes (and I’m paraphrasing), “There are two ultimate fears in life. One is the fear of being thought a fool. The second is the fear of finding out that you really are a fool.”

I can imagine Geisel saying something like, “Let them think you’re a fool. You might even find out you are a fool! So what?”

So what? Life is short. Yes, we all have to deal with some serious and troubling things. But that doesn’t mean we take difficulties, ours or those of someone we love, less seriously if we can lighten up. If I was close to someone who had a serious problem they were troubled by, I really used to believe that if I allowed myself to enjoy life, I was somehow being disloyal to that person. I now know that that is hogwash. Laughter, acting silly and finding humor in our lives are just as important for adults as they are for young people. They are good for the soul, body and mind. So, as we begin this new year, we might try adding some creative fun in the way we approach life. “Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!”

