

“Indeterminacy”

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

October 7, 2007

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

One of the satisfying things about sports is, they almost always have an ending and an outcome. Even when a game ends up a tie, at least it ends up, sometimes even with something as decisive as a three-run homer by Manny Ramirez in the bottom of the ninth. A lot of life is otherwise. It's indeterminate, indefinite, and inconclusive.

There was a television show, “The Sopranos.” You may have heard of it. It aired over six years on the cable network HBO. I know some of you watched, including some who watched only the ten minutes it took to decide that its wasn't acceptable fare, given the violence and coarse language. Even though I usually don't much care for movies about the Mafia myself, I did watch the Sopranos some, which featured as an opening the protagonist driving through out from New York City through North Jersey, where I'm from.

Which leads me to this week's indefensible tangent, one I almost indulged last week after having noted that few ministers begin a new church year welcoming folks back to their so-so religion, trumpeting, “Hey, It Could be Even Worse!”

I held off then, but now that I've mentioned New Jersey, here goes. It seems the Garden State has an image problem. This, despite the fact that by any measure, it is the first or second wealthiest state in the country. People who could afford to live lots of other places, choose to live in New Jersey, and don't care about the jokes.

Two years ago New Jersey decided it needed a new slogan, something to match I <heart> NY. Their consultant came up with, “We'll Win You Over,” but that struck folks as defensive. You can

imagine the other suggestions, though: “New Jersey: We’ve Got Three Really, Really Big Roads.” Or “New Jersey: What’s That Smell?” “Now With 10% Less Toxic Waste!” “We Have an Exit for You.” “Most of Our Elected Officials Have Not Been Indicted.” The popular favorite seemed to be, “New Jersey: You Got a Problem With That?” Although I like, “New Jersey: I’m Just Saying.”

There were 86 episodes of the Sopranos, the last of which aired earlier this year. That particular show drew a huge audience, because while only some folks had watched all 85 preceding episodes, many had seen enough to know the characters, or had read about them. And there was this drama that had been building all season: Would Tony Soprano, the father in the family and a mob boss in the other kind of family, end up killed or not? Or maybe jailed, or relocated.

In the last episode, the writer had a fine old time building up that drama, until the final scene, as the Sopranos gather for a dinner out. Here is how the scene is described on the show’s own website (where you can find the plots of all 86 shows in detail):

“Tony is the first to arrive at Holsten's for a family dinner. He sits in a booth and plays a song on the jukebox, watching the door. Carmela [his wife] enters and joins him, asking about his meeting with Mink [his lawyer]. He tells her Carlo's gonna testify and she takes the news with a sigh. [Their son] AJ arrives next, complaining about the more mundane tasks of his job but quotes old advice from his father: ‘Try to remember the times that were good.’ Meanwhile, Meadow [the daughter] struggles to parallel park outside. Customers come and go -- a shady looking guy who's been sitting at the counter enters the restroom. Finally parking the car, Meadow runs inside to join her family, just in time for dinner.”

Period. Cut to black, a black that lingered long enough for people to wonder if their TV set was broken, and at just the wrong moment, just when we were about to learn how it all comes out. But that was it, the end, and we won’t ever know what happened next to these characters, or what happened after that.

This really bothered, even angered some viewers, but I thought it was great. It was just what I hoped the writer would do. It's what life so often is really like.

Mind you, not always, as other events in the life of the characters had demonstrated only too well over the years. Characters we came to know well and even liked would get killed, and that was the last we saw of that actor.

In our lives, too, things happen, even suddenly, that change things forever, sometimes profoundly. And other times, we live with life's indeterminacy. We are called on to be ready for both and to get through, and we do, sometimes in triumph, sometimes in grief, sometimes just muddling through, with a little help from our friends, hoping luck is on our side.

In my first few sermons this fall, several times I've thought – and once I said out loud – that the point I was making wasn't meant to apply to our occupation of Iraq. To float on one's back, you can't panic and give up when your feet sink down below the surface. Stay calm, stay at it -- that isn't how I feel about the war. So when I say, we need to accept that sometimes things don't end neatly and we need to stick with it and muddle through as best we can, again, I'm not applying that to the war.

I don't want to dwell on that topic, since I know it weighs heavily enough on many minds all week long, without my bringing it up, and usually I don't; although every week that seems odd, since it weighs on my mind, too -- this week alongside the report of the killings by Blackwater mercenaries, more apparent confirmation of the charges that the administration authorized torture, the president's veto of expanded health care coverage for needy children, and more. These concerns do not seem partisan to me, as conscientious Republicans and Democrats alike attempt to find effective ways of responding to an administration ongoingly disconnected from some of the country's best traditions and from its citizens' decency and common sense.

I do want to say one thing about the occupation. Two or three years ago, when it became apparent that maybe the invasion hadn't

been all that great an idea, some people began saying that whether we should have gone in or not was no longer relevant, all that mattered was focusing on what to do thenceforth to have as good an outcome as possible.

I'm not buying it. I'm all for as good an outcome as possible, though I doubt that any outcome will be a good one. Myself, I would bring as many of our people out of there as possible as soon as possible. The president may be right that by persisting some reasonably good outcome is possible. As I have said from the beginning, I would love to be wrong. I take no joy in having been right so far, and would gladly give away claims to accuracy to some happier result than has happened yet.

But the invasion itself is not irrelevant, and must never become so. Even if the president's vision of the future comes true in Iraq, the cost that we and the Iraqi people have paid is much too high to justify our involvement there. And I doubt it will go anywhere near that well.

But back to the indeterminacy that touches not just our Iraqi strategy so far, but our own lives as well, every day, even in the garden.

Indeterminate – it's quite a word. It can mean, unlimited in scope, like life when something goes on and on without resolution, or like most of the tomatoes I grow. Tomatoes are either indeterminate or determinate. The latter plants stop when they get to their full height. The indeterminates just keep going, outgrowing their poles, toppling over, growing back toward earth until age or the first frost calls a stop.

But then there's indeterminism as a philosophical idea, that not everything is determined, preordained, bound to happen, that events in fact are subject to chance and the power of personal will.

Determinisms abound and always have. They declare that events are meant to be, that god or history or childhood history or economics or a willful universe determines what takes place. I think it's not that simple, not by a long shot, that things that

happen are often indeterminate not only in not having a clear conclusion, but also in not being free from mere happenstance.

As has been often noted, “human beings resist the idea that events occur in random fashion.” [William Grimes, *N. Y. Times*] Sure, it’s not only randomness; there is will and economics and history and all those other very real factors. But also luck, odds, chance, and the very real factor of coincidence.

So we get by as best we can in that real and somewhat indeterminate world, where events are not entirely within our control or that of anyone or anything else, except the physical laws of the natural world of which we are a part.

One of my favorite accounts of our situation was offered by my longtime friend and colleague John Nichols, who just last year was interim minister in Framingham, having earlier served for 23 years in Wellesley Hills. He is now the interim at one of our churches in Providence. He wrote,

“When the British colonized India they also indulged themselves in building golf courses. Apparently the golf course in Calcutta was built near a monkey habitat, and that location created a problem the builders had not foreseen. The monkeys took to the game of golf, as they understood it and thoroughly relished chasing the little white balls. Once in possession of the ball, they seemed to enjoy throwing it somewhere else.

“The keepers of the golf course tried fencing the monkeys out, but no fence ever built could hold them. They attempted to lure the monkeys away, but the monkeys could think of nothing more fascinating than chasing golf balls and being chased by golfers. Some monkeys were trapped and carted away but there were always replacements. “The golfers finally found they had no other choice but to include the monkeys in new rules of the game. The new rule was if a monkey picked up your ball, you must play the ball where the monkey finally dropped it. This could work several ways. You might hit a drive screaming straight down the fairway only to have a monkey toss it into the rough. But, it is equally possible that you might slice the ball onto the wrong

fairway only to have a monkey retrieve it and place it on the proper green. The monkeys brought equal measures of gratuitous bad and good luck to the game.

“Life is a little bit like this. You can work hard and live right or play all of the angles that you figure will lead to ‘success’ and some monkey will still drop your ball onto the wrong fairway. On the other hand many of us have been saved from a host of dumb mistakes by similarly random good luck. Play the ball where the monkey drops it? It is a view that encourages us to take the tough breaks that come along less as a personal affront and more as an opportunity to make the best of a life that never will be completely predictable. What better choice is there?”

What better choice indeed. May life bless us with patience, good humor, persistence, and the support of family, friends, and this, our religious community, as we deal with the indeterminacies of life, the monkeys on the fairways of our lives.

HYMN 287