

## **“Defiant Butterflies”**

*A Sermon by Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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On Friday night, a group gathered here to watch the documentary, “Defying the Nazis,” by Ken Burns and Artemis Joukowsky. The film depicts the actions of Waitstill and Martha Sharp to rescue political dissidents and Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi occupation in Europe. A Unitarian minister next door in Wellesley, Rev. Sharp and his wife received a call from a Unitarian official. Will you go? He asked.

At the time, the Sharps had 2 young children at home. In the film, Martha recounts how she felt torn between “a sense of love and duty to her children and her husband.” Over the next few years, the Sharps would travel back and forth to Europe as they risked their freedom and their safety in service of saving those who faced certain imprisonment or death. While both Sharps would survive the war, their marriage did not withstand the strain and changes brought by their actions.

Why risk so much? Why take action in this way with the stakes so high? My mom, who watched the film, told me this week, “I don’t think I would have gone.” I don’t think she’s alone with that sentiment. In fact, 17 others were asked before the Sharps said yes.

The film’s title, *Defying the Nazis*, boldly proclaims the *action* the Sharps took by choosing to go. In the face of an oppressive power swallowing Europe in bigoted violence, the Sharps responded with defiance. Rooted in their convictions of the dignity of human life, they put their skills and their bodies into action to defy the hate of the Nazis.

Admiring a couple like the Sharps is easy to do. In a world where hatred and violence erupt anew generation after generation, we need people like the Sharps who are willing to put their skills and even their very lives on the line to save others, to stop hate, to work for a better world. But, sometimes stories like the Sharps can also leave us feeling a bit guilty that we might be falling short. Perhaps we should be doing more?

How much should we be doing? This question arises throughout our lives. From political issues such as the Syrian refugee crises to justice issues such as Black Lives Matter, we ask *should I be doing more?* Or, more intimately, maybe we’re asking questions such as: How much should I be helping the kids with their homework or making decisions on their behalf? How much should we be helping the elderly neighbor struggling to live

independently? How much should I contribute to the important project at work when it conflicts with commitments at home?

These are tough questions. And yet, a quick Google search of quotes about “taking action” simply suggests that all that you need to do is *act!* “*The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing,*” says a quote by Walt Disney. Or, words blazoned across an image of a man atop a mountain staring across the sun drenched landscape declares: “*The distance between your dreams and reality is called action.*”

Such quotes leave me vacillating between an urge to leap to my feet to “just do it” and an anger that such sentiments vastly underestimate the burdens and oppressions so many face in simply trying to live. This sermon is an attempt to wrestle with this tension between calls to action and the limits of our lives.

Mary Oliver writes of this tension in her poem, *The Journey*. She begins...

*One day you finally knew  
What you had to do, and began,  
Though the voices around you  
Kept shouting  
Their bad advice...*

Actions always happens within a context. And sometimes those contexts exert powerful pulls upon us. Voices shout...or whisper critically within. Literal and metaphorical doors can be shut, affixed with labels about who does and does not belong. The lists of possible actions stretch out far longer than the hours in a day, the dollars in the bank, or the courage or inner energy that we possess.

And yet, we are told in hundreds of different ways, *take action!* Just do it! Stop thinking, act.

There are times when such counsel is exactly what we need. The momentum of the status quo can restrain us from actions that might lead us in a better direction. We get stuck. We get numb. We get tired. We become afraid of change. There are times when we need to move beyond what is known and familiar. There are times when we need to simply *act*.

Our own UU tradition is one that has long counseled action. From the beginning, a shorthand expression for our liberal faith has been “deeds not creeds.” Which is to say that the actions we take matter more in demonstrating our religious convictions than recitations of religious beliefs. Such a tradition has fostered countless persons who actively

sought to live out their values by how they loved their families, engaged in the civic life of their town, and sought to impact the political and social life of their shared world. Our own First Parish covenant does not convey statements of religious beliefs, but rather calls for actions—to *search* for meaning, to *care* for another, to *work* together for a better world. Ours is an active faith calling us to live out our values.

Yet, such a call heard within a context of a world with enormous problems can begin to feel not simply overwhelming, but even hopeless. The relentless streams of *shoulds* may feel like a painful reminder of all the ways you are falling short. You *should* eat more (organic) vegetables. You *should* be more patient with your kids or irritating neighbor. You *should* recycle more, drive less, put up solar panels.

I'm not saying that any of these things are wrong. They are all good and, quite likely, true. And yet, I don't think we can live well if we constantly feel as if we are falling short of all that we *should* be doing. Aware that we can never fully meet all the expectations of what we should be doing, it would be too easy to drift into an apathy that doesn't even bother trying to act on *any* issue. Why bother?

Besides, what difference can one person really make?

Reflecting on this question, I began to think about the “butterfly effect.” In the 1990's movie *Havana*, Robert Redford's character explains the butterfly effect by saying, “A butterfly can flutter its wings over a flower in China and cause a hurricane in the Caribbean.” In other words, the smallest action can cause a profound impact.

The butterfly effect is widely understood in popular culture as a concept of causation—mapping how one small thing leads to a chain of events ever greater. In fact, the original idea was something quite different.

The concept originated in a 1972 scientific paper by Tony Lorenz entitled, “Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?”. In modeling long-term weather forecasts, Lorenz made tiny alterations to atmospheric conditions that did lead to major changes. This insight opens up big questions about weather predictions. In the real world of complex, interconnected systems of nature and human activity, how could we ever trace back or map the source of such tiny alterations?

As Boston Globe writer Peter Dizikes recounts in his article on Lorenz,

“So a principal lesson of the butterfly effect is the opposite of Redford’s line: It is extremely hard to calculate such things with certainty. There are many butterflies out there. A tornado in Texas could be caused by a butterfly in Brazil, Bali, or Budapest. Realistically, we can’t know. ... When small imprecisions matter greatly, the world is radically unpredictable.”<sup>1</sup>

So the butterfly effect is not about predicting the impact of a small action. Nor can we always know what small action made the difference. The butterfly effect is realizing that in a complex, interconnected universe actions do matter, but we can’t always know how they will matter. In this way, the radical unpredictability suggests that *all* our actions—whatever size, small or large—*will* have impact.

Our actions matter. Yet, unlike a butterfly that acts and reacts to its context as its DNA programs, we humans are self-aware organisms. We are aware that our actions have impacts that are small and large, seemingly irrelevant or life-changing. We believe that we can choose our actions—within the limits of our contexts. In this freedom of choice lies our morality, our ethical responsibility for our actions. We ‘know better’ unless we are too young to understand or insane.

So what do we choose to do with our butterfly existence as we flutter through the days of our lives? We can live out our values. Living our values does not demand a complex calculus of impact. Living our values starts from a place within, from our convictions about what is right or wrong, better or worse, good or bad. In a way, our values can function like our ethical DNA, directing our actions and reactions within an unpredictable environment.

Within this framework, the ethical question is not whether we are doing *enough* or whether we could do *more*. Rather, the ethical question becomes are we living out our values in whatever choices, small or large, might come our way?

In the opening words, I quoted the quip that a minister’s job is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This sermon seeks to do a bit of both. On the one hand, for those who feel overwhelmed by all that is wrong and unjust in the world, I want you to hear that it’s not all your problem to fix. No one of us can predict the right action or group of actions that will ‘fix’ the world. But we *can* have an impact in small ways and large by living out the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dizikes, “The Meaning of the Butterfly: Why pop culture loves the ‘butterfly effect,’ and gets it totally wrong,” Boston Globe, June 8, 2008. Online at: [http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/06/08/the\\_meaning\\_of\\_the\\_butterfly/?page=1](http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/06/08/the_meaning_of_the_butterfly/?page=1)

values we believe to contribute good to the world. That is all that we can do. Be defiant butterflies that resist the hate in the world and seek after life.

On the other hand, many of us do live comfortable lives. Lives that often resist disruption. I don't want the butterfly metaphor to sound like a license to just do "whatever." Nor am I suggesting a nihilistic view that since everything matters, nothing matters. Rather, I am saying that in a complex, interconnected world that our actions matter in ways small and large that we can't always predict. What we do matters. So what are we going to do?

Mary Oliver ends her poem, *The Journey* with these words:

*...there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing that you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.*

Taking action can take many forms. It can save one life or it can save thousands. We can't always predict. But we can all be on the journey of seeking to live out our values, trying to follow an ethical path as we understand it. Perhaps we will not ever 'fix' the world, but we can live as defiant butterflies—seeking to live a life of love and goodness, hope and justice against the winds of hate and hopelessness, cruelty and injustice in whatever ways we can.

So may it be.

Amen.