

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 8 December, 2019

## Karma

Karma is the law of cause and effect. It's in no way esoteric; as the Bible has it, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"<sup>1</sup> or, in plain English, what we plant, we harvest. There's no trick here, except a good one: figuring out how to live an ethical life, a moral life, is a lot clearer if we subscribe to the law of karma.

In the interest of not burying the lead, let me share with you the insight that converted me to paying attention to the law of karma. Filmmaker Barbara Center was living with life-threatening lymphoma. The question that arose from her cancer support group, she says, was not, "Why is this happening to me?" The question was — get ready for it — "Why is this happening *for* me?"

Why is this happening for me? We may not like it, but it's a transformational way of framing our experience to say

*I am not a victim; I am a survivor.*

Every challenge is an opportunity to ripen spiritually — to learn and grow.

The law of karma grew out of Indian religion and philosophy. In India, it is paired with a belief in rebirth into many lifetimes in which we experience the effects of what we have done with what we've been given. To its adherents, karma serves as the major motivation to live a moral life and as the primary explanation of the existence of evil.

In Christianity, to sin is to "miss the mark," often viewed as deliberate disobedience to G\*d. "Many religious traditions, [actually], notably the Abrahamic religions that emerged in the Middle East — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — place a reward and punishment for human actions in the hands of a divine [judge].... The classical traditions of India, [however] — Hinduism, Buddhism,

---

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6:7

and Jainism — view karma as operating according to an autonomous causal law.... No external agent or divine will intervenes.” In other words, there’s no such thing as good luck or bad luck; it’s all just the fruition of our actions — karma — making for spiritual accountability.<sup>2</sup>

I’m with the Indian traditions on this one; I see no need to drag an angry, vengeful G\*d into the mix. This one’s on us. The place I’d depart from the Indian philosophy is their surety about it all being worked out — for better or worse — in future lifetimes. While the idea of people doing evil deeds being forced to pay in kind is kind of fabulous, I’m content, in good Unitarian Universalist fashion, with focusing on this lifetime. Do you know that great quotation from our Unitarian forbear, Henry David Thoreau? As he lay dying from tuberculosis at the age of 44,<sup>3</sup> he was visited by his friend Parker Pillsbury. Curious about the afterlife, Parker asked Henry what he saw of “the opposite shore,” across the River Styx. Thoreau famously responded, “One world at a time.”

So this is karma for UUs: Whether or not karma is “real,” it can inspire us to live a more authentic, compassionate life, attending to what we’re planting and to what we choose to do with the harvest.

Not, *Why is this happening to me?* but *Why is this happening for me?*

Let’s dig a little deeper into karma for UUs: choosing to act as if what we do makes a difference. If we’re willing to entertain the idea that life here on earth is life in Soul School — we’re here to grow a soul — then karma is the opportunity to progress through the lessons life proffers.

Author Judith Johnson writes, “We [may] ... find ourselves presented with the same lesson again and again ... until we gain [its] wisdom and value.... Karma is not about retribution ... or reward, but ... an opportunity to make different choices; ... the opportunity for healing.... It is a balancing action that offers chances ... to learn important spiritual lessons.”<sup>4</sup>

Here’s where karma for UUs departs from its India origins: I want to land hard on my absolute horror at the idea that any good people deserve bad fortune. When I was a young minister, a 5-year-old in my Sunday school was run over by the school bus. My theology was utterly inadequate to the tragedy. Rabbi Harold

---

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Olivelle, Karma,

<sup>3</sup> Thoreau lived from 1817-1862

<sup>4</sup> Judith Johnson Please see [huffpost.com/entry/wheat-is-karma\\_b\\_1376246](http://huffpost.com/entry/wheat-is-karma_b_1376246)

Kushner saved me with his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner's G\*d would never have allowed such a thing; bad things, he says, just happen. And when they happen, it's up to us to embody the divine and rush in to help.

Where karma comes in is in what we do with what we are given. There's a very famous passage from Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir, *Night*, in which, in the spring of 1944, death camp prisoners of the Holocaust are forced to witness a hanging. One prisoner beseeches, "Where is merciful G\*d?" And the response comes, "Where is He? This is where — hanging here from this gallows..."

G\*d, he is saying, did not create this monstrosity. G\*d is there, suffering with the one who suffers. As I choose to understand it, karma doesn't explain the tragedy; it explains our response to tragedy.

\*

You've heard me speak about Peter, a young man in our congregation in Brewster who drove his truck off the road and into a tree in an alcoholic blackout. His wife, riding in the passenger seat, died instantly.

When Peter sobered up, he, too wanted to die. It might have gone either way, actually, but in jail, drowning in grief and guilt, he attended every 12-step meeting, praying to be relieved of his suffering and wondering what G\*d had saved him for.

When he got out, having learned that the only way to stay sober is to help someone else stay sober, Peter began to look for opportunities to serve. He never missed an AA meeting, never said no to someone asking for help. And every single thing he did was done — is done to this day — in his wife's name, to honor her memory.

\*

Let's cheer up and talk about instant karma. One of the classical understandings of karma is that it is unpredictable; we never know when it's payback time. So we choose to act as if the law of karma is at work in the world and adopt a kind of wild patience, waiting for karma to ripen. Sometimes, we don't have to wait long.

Here are two of my favorite instant karma stories:

A Reddit user named Adolph Manson writes, "One day, I paid for one but took two papers, because I was sick of co-workers rifling through MY paper. As I

[started to walk] off with both newspapers, I [realized] that my shirt tail [had gotten caught] in the newspaper box when it slammed shut. I had to put in another [quarter] to get my shirt out.”

And, on a more serious note....

As they drove down the interstate in western Wisconsin, Sara Berg and her cousin, Lisa Meier, suddenly “heard an awful noise” and pulled onto the side of the road. It was a flat tire, and neither of them had a clue how to fix it. They called Lisa’s husband, who was on his way when Winnipeg natives Ann and Victor Giesbrecht stopped their pickup truck and Victor hopped out to see if he could help.

“It [was] kind of scary,” says Lisa, because [nowadays,] you really don’t know what you’re getting into.” But “Victor is the kind of person who always wants to help a stranded motorist, Ann says. “He’s the type of person who gives you 100 percent and worries about himself later.” He changed the tire and Lisa thanked him as they shook hands. “Someone up above put me in the right place at the right time,” Victor said.

Everyone got back on the road, but less than a quarter of a mile later, they saw the Giesbrechts’ car pulled over. Sara and Lisa pulled off. Ann waved them over, frantic. Victor had collapsed. “I think he’s having a heart attack,” she said.

Sara, a certified nursing assistant, jumped into the truck. Victor had no pulse and wasn’t breathing. Sara began chest compressions while Lisa called 911.

State trooper Kate Sampson arrived within a seemingly interminable five minutes, joining Sara in trying to save Victor’s life. Just then, Lisa’s husband drove up and took over for Sara. Two deputy sheriffs arrived with an AED and began delivering shocks to restart Victor’s heart.

The survival rate for someone who suffers cardiac arrest outside a hospital is just over ten percent. Victor survived.

We can go over and over the coincidences, the different people and their gifts that had to line up just right to fix a flat ... and save a life. Or we can say, simply, it was karma.

To bring us home, here’s a story of karma that still makes my head spin.

Years ago, my friend Richard applied to be a Big Brother; he's always loved kids. He was paired with Don, a young teenager who'd landed in a DYS group home. Richard adored him immediately. They did all the usual Big Brother things, and then some. Richard changed his work schedule so he could go to every one of Don's sports game — all three school seasons plus summertime. He took him to an antique car show in California and to Fenway for a big Sox-Yankees game. After late night events, Don would spend the night tucked into Richard's guest room, and Richard would lie awake, thinking, *I think I could do this Dad thing.*

You know where this is going; like so many beautifully failed Big Brother-Little Brother pairings before them, Richard and Don became father and son, and it was very sweet; they were two peas in a pod.

Don's mom had been young and single when he was born and hadn't been in the picture much; Don had landed with DYS when his maternal grandmother had grown unable to care for him. Perhaps now that he had a dad, Don was increasingly curious about who his biological father was. He knew his parents had been very young, and that his mother's family had moved away before his father even knew she was pregnant. His father didn't even know he existed! His grandmother knew the details, but somehow, the subject was off-limits. Richard encouraged him to visit her and just ask, but Don balked, and Richard didn't push it.

And then one day, Don asked if they could go for a walk on the beach near their home. He was unusually silent. Suddenly, he surprised Richard by saying, "I called Nana and asked her." Richard stopped and turned to look at his son, who also stopped and stood, facing him. "I found out who my dad is," Don said. And before Richard could say anything, Don said "You are."

Richard hugged him and said, "Of course I am."

And Don said, "No Dad, I mean it; you're my father."

And it all came back to Richard.... All those years ago, the girl next door, the casual summer romance, and the strange, sudden disappearance of her and her family. Richard had adopted his own son.

\*

Beloved spiritual companions,

Maybe coincidences are G\*d's way

of remaining anonymous.  
Maybe divine intervention has nothing to do with any of this,  
and the world is turning  
powered by the law of karma.  
*It's not ours to know.*

But I want to invite us to imagine asking  
not *Why is this happening to me?*  
but *Why is this happening for me?*  
What do we do with what we are given?  
Every challenge is an opportunity  
for spiritual growth.

May we choose to act as if  
what we do makes a difference,  
to live as if we will harvest what we plant.

May we adopt a wild patience,  
and choose to believe  
it matters that we are kind and generous.  
*Welcome to soul school.*