

## Opportunity Knocks — Are You Ready?

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*Talent alone won't make you a success. Neither will being in the  
right place at the right time, unless you are ready.  
The most important question is 'Are you Ready?'*  
Johnny Carson

### Opening Words<sup>2</sup>

Julie Ham

Batter up!

When you hear these words, you know something's about to happen.

If you've ever played baseball or softball, you know the feeling of stepping up to the plate and raising your arms into the batting stance. You feel powerful. You can be a hero. Even if you're a bit anxious and fear you might strike out, even if you've never hit the ball beyond the infield before; this is a moment when skill and luck can make heroes out of underdogs. Anything is possible.

It's also a moment of decision. Should I swing at this pitch? Should I swing for the fences? Or should I try a bunt, and move my teammate into scoring position? Each pitch is a new opportunity.



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Baseball, like life, is a balancing act between individual achievement and community, or in this case, team goals and accomplishments. Yes, home runs and 100 mile-per-hour fast balls are exciting, and the star players get most of the attention, but nobody makes it to the World Series alone.

Everyday can be a whole new ballgame, if we're willing to step up to the plate and make the most of the opportunities that life may throw our way.

Let us consider these opportunities, as we worship together this morning.

### **Reading<sup>3</sup>**

from *Records of the Life of John Murray*

*The brig Hand-in-Hand arrived in Philadelphia from England, in September 1770, but was prevented from discharging her cargo there by a non-importation agreement, and proceeded on toward New York. However, the brig went off course and crossed a bar in Cranberry Inlet, on the New Jersey coast, becoming grounded.*

*The captain arranged to transfer some of the cargo to a sloop, which enabled the brig to recross the bar on the next tide, but the wind shifted and the sloop was unable to follow. A Mr. John Murray had, at the request of the captain, stayed with the sloop. Since the sloop had no provisions, Murray and his small crew went ashore to obtain supplies. In his memoirs, Murray described what happened on shore:*

*“I went with the boatmen to a tavern, and leaving them there, pursued a solitary walk through the woods ....*

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes are from Richard Eddy's *Universalism in America* and are attributed by Eddy to John Murray's memoir. (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1884). Vol. I. pp. 123ff.

“As thus I passed along, ... I unexpectedly reached a small log house, and saw a girl cleaning a fresh fish. I requested that she would sell it to me. ‘No, sir, you will find a very great plenty at the next house; we want this.’

“...I went forward. I came to the door [of the next house]; there was indeed a large pile of fish of various sorts, and at a little distance stood a tall man, rough in appearance, and evidently advanced in years. ‘Pray sir, will you have the goodness to sell me one of those fish?’ — ‘No, sir.’ — ‘That is strange, when you have so many, to refuse me a single fish!’ — ‘I did not refuse you a fish sir. You are welcome to as many as you please; but I do not sell this article.’ ...

“I informed him that the mariners ... were at a tavern [and I was taking the fish to them for supper]. He said, ‘Well, sir, after supper, I beg you would return and take a bed with us; you will be better pleased here than at a tavern.’ I was astonished to see so much genuine politeness and urbanity under so rough a form; but my astonishment was greatly increased on my return. His room was prepared, his fire bright, and his heart open. ‘Come,’ said he, ‘my friend, I am glad you have returned. ... I have been expecting you a long time.’”

*The conversation continued, and the man, Thomas Potter, told Mr. Murray that he had been born there, left to join the British Navy because he hoped to earn enough to be married, but returned to find his girl already married. After he recovered his tranquility, as he said, he married her sister and sat down to work. He told Murray that he could neither read nor write, but had often heard the sacred Scriptures, and having been so well blessed, had constructed a meetinghouse. But alas, over many years time, he had not found a preacher whose sentiments corresponded with his own belief ‘that all mankind are equally dear to Almighty God.’ Murray goes on describing what Potter said next,*

“My friends often ask me, ‘Where is the preacher of whom you spake?’ And my constant reply has been, ‘He will by and by make his appearance.’ The moment I beheld your vessel on shore, it seemed as if a voice had audibly sounded in my ears, ‘There, Potter, in that vessel, cast away on that shore, is the preacher you have been so long expecting.’ I heard the voice, and I believed the report; and when you came up to my door and asked for the fish, the same voice seemed to repeat, ‘Potter, this is the man, this is the person, whom I have sent to preach in your house!’

#### **Sermon<sup>4</sup>**

Duane Fickeisen

You may know the rest of the story. John Murray, the sloop caretaker / preacher, had been a Universalist preacher in England, when his wife became ill. The cost of her care and other family crises put him deeply in debt. The deaths of his infant son, his wife, one of his brothers, and three of his sisters all in a short period left him distraught and suicidal. He was arrested and put in debtors’ prison until a brother-in-law rescued him.

Forswearing preaching, and not yet 30 years old, Murray set out for the new world, hoping simply to live out his life in peace and quiet. He planned to go into the wilderness and live in seclusion.

At Thomas Potter’s fireside, he tried to duck the invitation to preach. He attempted to deny that he had preached, but was unable to lie in response to Potter’s direct questions — “Have you never preached? Can you say you have never preached?” — “I cannot; but I never intend to preach again.”

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<sup>4</sup> ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

— “Has not God lifted up the light of his countenance upon you? Has he not shown you his truth?” — “I trust he has.”  
— “And how dare you hide this truth? Do men light a candle to put it under a bushel? If God has shown you his salvation, why should you not show it to your fellowmen? But I know you will. I am sure God Almighty has sent you for this purpose. I am not deceived; I am sure I am not deceived.” Murray was terrified and said he was obligated to care for the cargo on the sloop and to make his way to New York as soon as possible.

Potter responded, “The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God.” After sharing prayers, Murray retreated to his chamber, and shedding tears, prayed through the night for relief, fearing that if he preached from his heart he would be met with strong opposition from orthodox preachers.

His fears were well founded. Our heritage has its share of martyrs who were burned at the stake, chased into exile, and bullied for holding their heretical beliefs.

The next day, Saturday, the wind was calm. Murray had decided that if the wind did not rise, he would take that as a sign that he should preach. But how he longed for a breeze! By evening it was still calm, and finally he agreed to Potter’s plan to send his servants around the area to announce the Sunday sermon.

The sermon, despite Murray’s deep anxiety, was well received. By Sunday afternoon the wind began to blow and Murray went back aboard the sloop and on to New York. Eventually he found his way to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he was instrumental in founding the Universalist Church in America.

The story we usually hear focuses on Murray. Indeed, I can

find no portrait of Thomas Potter other than a drawing representing the meeting of Potter and Murray and no writings about Potter other than those derived from Murray's memoirs.

Yet it seems to me that Potter is the hero of the story. It was Thomas Potter, the illiterate, aging farmer, and who was childless, who had been the principle player. Potter was the one who built the chapel, and whose deeply held universalist beliefs led him to seek a preacher who would give the great message of ultimate hope and the call to embrace *this* life fully that is the essence of Universalism. It was Potter who had waited for years for his preacher to come. The illiterate, yet 'urbane' and hospitable Potter who received the voices of prophecy and who persuaded Murray to preach and launched him on the way to being our religious ancestor. Potter whose enthusiasm infected Murray, even through his fears and deep reluctance.

Potter had the vision, the courage, and the fortitude to believe in his vision, to build his meetinghouse, and to persist in the search for a suitable preacher for many long years. And then to send the preacher off to spread the good news, to evangelize to so many who were hungry — without even knowing it — for the great salvation in the message of universalism. For the really good news. That saving grace eventually spread across the land. We still struggle to understand, to accept, and to spread the good news in the face of conservative opposition that preaches fear and hell and damnation rather than the everlasting love of God.

Potter was ready. Opportunity came knocking — looking for a fish! — and Potter was paying enough attention to recognize it and embrace it and indeed, to wrestle with the opposition he met.

Now consider your own congregation. You have built a meetinghouse and an organization that are ready for the un-

knowable future. Your vision is of an enduring presence for liberal religion — one that is robust and sustainable. You have taken calculated risks in the past to achieve that vision, and so far they have paid off handsomely. You risked entering the New Congregation program and accepting the appointment of not one, but two, newly minted ministers from a seminary in far-off California.

The more conservative voices among the founders were wary, as well they should have been. “How can we possibly find the money to pay these ministers? What if it all collapses?” And they were balanced by optimists who argued that they would somehow figure it all out, that unless they took the risk they would surely fail.

And not long after that, the opportunity arose to buy this building at a terrific price and with terms that still astound anyone who hears about them. It seemed far too big. How would we ever fill it up? Were there not way too many rooms? And no furniture? And would it not be expensive to heat and care for? And was it not in this remote village of Boiling Springs? Would anyone come all the way out here? Could we afford to move from the Union Philosophical Society Room in Denny Hall at Dickinson College if even one person would stop coming? And how in the world would we service the debt on a mortgage, even if it was much less than many of us owe on our own homes?

And later, could we add to our staff by creating a position for a professional music director? Even with a Chalice Lighter grant, could we afford it? Would it make more sense to hire a volunteer coordinator first and put off hiring the music director for a few years? How could we possibly find someone to fill the position who was skilled, could accompany hymns and help build our choir, understood liberal religion, and would

accept a quarter-time position, even if we offered fair compensation?

Well, yes, as a matter of fact, we have done all that and more. And now, with the Laws Music Fund endowment, we are assured of a base of funding and of the incentive of more funds if we match them, which would enable us to expand our music program and welcome David's skills and talents even more fully.

The founders had faith in what could be. They believed that if they built it others would come in search of the liberal religious message of hope and transformation, and of our commitment to making a difference in the world.

They believed that newcomers would find hospitality and join this community of seekers on the journey of discovery. They had faith that others would be hungry, too, to shape meaning from the experiences of life and to find a religious home where life's passages could be celebrated with dignity and honesty; where children could learn the values we assert in our principles; and where we would gather in common purpose and covenant rather than demand avowed allegiance to a particular creedal statement of belief.

But what really stands out for me is the commitment of the founders to give it away, to create this congregation as their legacy and gift to the Cumberland Valley. They were explicit in stating that they were building it to give it away to the future, to the next and the next and the next folks who come through the door and find themselves at home here. They didn't expect to hold onto power and influence as the exclusive domain of the founders, but to share it widely.

That vision of a robust, sustainable, enduring home for liberal religion remains a guiding beacon of hope. We've come a long way toward assuring it, and yet the vision holds energy

for us because it is not yet fully assured. The enterprise is fragile. But to paraphrase Franklin Roosevelt, the only thing we have to fear is a loss of faith. As long as this community remains dedicated to the vision and to the mission of transforming lives and caring for the world, and as long as you believe it can be done if you work together, it will thrive and endure, even through the rapids of change.

This congregation is one of few strong success stories from the New Congregation program. I believe that a critical factor in your success has been that you have paid attention to potential opportunities and been willing to take risks to embrace them. You've been ready when opportunity knocked.

Your board met in a planning retreat all day yesterday, and they were joined by your staff members who volunteered their time to participate over and above the expectations of their jobs. The focus of the retreat was on planning for the transitions that lie ahead in your ministry and starting a conversation about how to engage in imagining the congregation you will become in the next several years.

Some of the retreat work involved nitty gritty stuff like how to assure that things Judy and I do and information we hold get handed off to others. Some of it involved planning for the transition in ministerial leadership. You'll hear more about that and be invited to offer your thoughts and feelings on it in a town meeting the board will hold on December 5.<sup>5</sup>

Be like Thomas Potter — have faith in the future and believe in the dreams you have for this congregation. Invite opportunity and be ready when it comes, welcome it and offer it your best hospitality. Invite it to sit at the fireside. Evaluate the costs and the risks, and be willing to invest in the future of

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<sup>5</sup> The date was finalized after the sermon.

your congregation. Keep the faith, believe in the vision and mission. And make it so.

Batter up!

*Image: John Murray, Illustration from The Life of John Murray (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1891 ed.) Public domain.*