

For All That Is Our Life

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

November 26, 2023

Did everyone pick up three pipe cleaners as you came into the sanctuary? If so, are they mangled already, or still in good order? Hold yours up if they are untouched—if you’ve managed not to touch them. Okay, you’re control freaks (like me), or you obey rules very well (also a tendency of mine).

Now raise your hands if your pipe cleaners have been made into objects of creative expression. Have any of you interconnected yours?

It’s all good.

Now, I just invite you to place them down beside you at least for the next 12 minutes.

If you did not get any pipe cleaners, raise your hand so our ushers can bring them to you.

For those online—you can grab a piece of paper to doodle or draw on, or to use to make origami or folded creations. If you happen to have pipe cleaners, please grab those (just kidding). It’s also fine to use your imagination and mind’s eye when we return to these in just a bit.

Phew, okay. We’ve gotten that taken care of!

If only life were that easy, right?

If only...

But it’s not, and we all know that.

Life may be more complicated than pipe cleaners; however, I would venture to say that life and pipe cleaners also share much in common.

First, life and pipe cleaners come in different colors.

They are both about form and function, though we may have forgotten the original purpose of both.

Pipe cleaners were invented by John Harry Stedman and Charles Angel in Rochester, New York, in the early 1900s. Stedman also invented the streetcar transfer ticket in 1892. The rights to pipe cleaners were sold to BJ Long Company, who still makes them today.¹

1 <https://rebornpipes.com/tag/history-of-pipe-cleaners/>

Originally designed to clean pipes, pipe cleaners are now used for many other purposes, including arts and crafts, or sermons given by a Unitarian Universalist minister. As one Google search revealed, these “*long and flexible tools can reach narrow, unseen areas with ease.*”²

Microscopic organisms, the earliest form of life on Earth, date back to 3.7 billion years ago.

The purpose of life? Well, that has been debated for as long as memory holds.

Here’s the thing: both life and pipe cleaners can be taken for granted. We can assume they will always be there, just as we expect them to be, and for whatever purpose we deem necessary.

Life and pipe cleaners invite us to be creative, and to imagine things heretofore unseen.

Both life and pipe cleaners can be smoothed out when we make mistakes, or decide on a new direction; however, the impressions of early forms always remain.

The impressions of early decisions remain. Who we have been, and what we experienced and believed, will always be a part of us.

Sometimes I think pop culture would have us try to eliminate parts of our stories. Smooth the pipe cleaner so flat that no one can tell it ever looked different than it does today.

But that’s impossible. Even if we throw the pipe cleaner away, and think no one knows, we know.

What if the purpose is not to try to erase the past, but to integrate it, to see its gifts, even in the hardest of times—even in the “worst mistakes” we made.

What if humans, like pipe cleaners, are gifted with the ability to make new choices and designs made even more unique by the ripples of previous form and design?

After all, anyone can take an orange pipe cleaner
2 “The Best Pipe Cleaners for Crafting,” ART-news, September 29, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/product-recommendations/best-pipe-cleaners-1234571727/>.

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and make it into a circle or even connect it to a circle of another color. But only this orange pipe cleaner can look exactly the way this will when it decides to reform or try a new way. (Connect to the other pipe cleaner)

The holiday season, starting with Thanksgiving, runs the risk, I fear, of becoming cliché and full of toxic positivity. "Be grateful," we are told, but only of feel-good things or things we all feel comfortable talking about.

I want to break that norm right now and invite us all to be grateful for what used to be, for the mistakes we have made in life, and for the decisions we wish we had made but did not. That's gratitude in the rawest and realest of forms. That's gratitude that connects us with each other's humanity and discourages death of spirit by comparison.

Let's do that now.

Pick up a pipe cleaner. Start with just one. Think of something you haven't necessarily been grateful for. It may be a decision that cost you money, or even a relationship. It may have been a mistake. Or a decision you then needed to change.

When you have that in your mind, begin to form the pipe cleaner into something that reminds you of that thing. Now hold that pipe cleaner and bring gratitude to it.

What did that difficult thing, regret, or failure teach you? How did it help to make you who you are today? Can you be grateful for its gifts, even if it's just to keep you humble? And if you don't feel grateful, can you start with acceptance? Acceptance that this happened? Acceptance that you made the mistake or took that road? And from that place of acceptance, can you feel compassion for yourself, knowing you did the best you could at the time?

Now pick up another pipe cleaner and think of another mistake or thing you have not been grateful for in the past. Ask yourself the same questions: What did this teach you? How did it help you become who you are today? Can you be grateful for this? If not, can you accept it and feel compassion for yourself?

Now make that pipe cleaner into a shape or design. See if you want that to be connected in any way to your first creation. For those of you online, you can do this with paper, drawing, or just using your imagination.

Now, if you are so moved, take the third pipe cleaner and go through the same process.

Look at what is in your hands. These things are part of you and your life story. They have played important roles, even if we don't yet see exactly how.

I invite you to either keep your creations or bring them forward to this altar of Thanksgiving, where they can be a part of the community of other unlikely sources of gratitude. An altar of realness. That's what we'll create. An altar of mistakes, tough times, and regrets.

Having done this, let me ask you: Do you feel different? What are you grateful for in this time? Those too belong at the table, of course.

Matt Haig, in his novel *The Midnight Library*, wrote these words that speak perfectly to what I'm encouraging us to consider. Thank you, Lea Pearson, for posting these.

It is easy to mourn the lives we aren't living, easy to wish we'd developed other talents, said yes to different offers.

Easy to wish we'd worked harder, loved better, handled our finances more astutely, been more popular, stayed in the band, gone to Australia, said yes to the coffee, or done more bloody yoga.

It takes no effort to miss the friends we didn't make and the work we didn't do and the people we didn't marry and the children we didn't have.

It is not difficult to see yourself through the lens of other people and to wish you were all the different kaleidoscopic versions of you they wanted you to be.

It is easy to regret, and keep regretting ad infinitum, until our time runs out.

But it is not lives we regret not living that are the real problem. It is the regret itself.

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It's the regret that makes us shrivel and wither
and feel like our own and other people's worst
enemy.

We can't tell if any of those other versions would
have been better or worse. Those lives are
happening, it is true, but you are happening as
well, and that is the happening we have to focus
on.³

May we remember the purpose of our lives,
and may we bless the many forms that takes,
honoring each for their gifts, and folding each into
the impressions of our wholeness.

Amen and blessed be.

³ Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library* (London:
Viking Penguin, 2020).