

“All is Possible”

Some of you may be old enough to remember the play South Pacific. If so you might recall the song Mary Martin sang in the role of Nellie Forbush, about being "a cockeyed optimist."

When the sky is a bright canary yellow
I forget every cloud I've ever seen,
So they call me a cockeyed optimist
Immature and incurably green.
I have heard people rant and rave and bellow
That we're done and we might as well be dead,
But I'm only a cockeyed optimist
And I can't get it into my head.
I hear the human race
Is fallin' on its face
And hasn't very far to go,
But ev'ry whippoorwill
Is sellin' me a bill
And tellin' me it just ain't so.
I could say life is just a bowl of Jello
And appear more intelligent and smart,
But I'm stuck like a dope
With a thing called hope,
And I can't get it out of my heart!
Not this heart...

On some days with the help of grace I'm Nellie Forbush. But deep down by nature I'm more of a catastrophizer. Which isn't all that bad, because when the worst doesn't happen – like when someone returns safely from a trip or my candidate wins – I don't take it for granted.

You may be familiar with the story about the twin boys whose only resemblance to each other was their looks. One typically saw the glass half-empty while the other delighted in it being half full. One was always looking on the bright side of life, the other saw only gloom and doom. One was the cockeyed optimist, the other your archetypal pessimist.

One Christmas morning, their parents sent them to the barn behind their home to look for what Santa Claus had left for each of them. The pessimist outran his brother. When he threw open the barn door, all he found was a pile of horse manure. He began to cry. "I knew it. This is Santa's stick and a coal for all the times I've been bad." When his brother saw the manure, his eyes lit up and he clapped his hands, saying, "There's got to be a pony in here somewhere."

I would venture that there's something of the optimist and the pessimist in each of us. We may both dread the holiday season and be at times filled with anticipation. The glittering lights can accentuate our own disappointment with life, our own shadow. They can turn us off or they can speak to us of the light that burns within each person. They can remind us of the words that a rabbi once said to his friends. "You are the light of the world." He addressed these words to a group of nobodies by the standards of the world. They had no status. But they were turned on by this Hebrew prophet's message of love, love that has the power to transform the bleakest of lives, love that makes anything possible.

Eighteen hundred years later, another man from a humble background not unlike that of the prophet Jesus said something very similar to an audience of children. It was Christmas time and he was delivering one of his famous annual Christmas lectures on "the Chemical History of the Candle." He pointed out that "respiration is quite literally a living process of combustion analogous to that of a burning candle." (Oxygen we breathe reacts with digested food—fuel—within the bloodstream, generating carbon dioxide which we expel.)

This teacher concluded his lesson on an uplifting note. He wished that his young listeners in their generation would be like candles and shine as light to those around them in how they lived. He wanted them to justify the beauty of the taper candle by making their deeds good and effective in the way that they treated one another.

The man was the English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday. The year was 1848. Faraday's life has the makings of a fairy tale, the kind of fairy tale that has all the pathos and struggle of real life as well as the discovery of deep meaning that inspires hope. This man's contagious sense of wonder and delight in what he was doing was part of his effectiveness with the young.

Faraday's own childhood home lay above a stable near London. His father was a blacksmith and Michael received no formal education. Apprenticed to a bookbinder at age 14, he became fascinated with the scientific studies that fell into his hands at work. His employer, impressed with the earnestness and hard work of his apprentice, made it possible for the young man to attend four lectures given by the renowned chemist Humphrey Davy at the Royal Institution of Science. Throughout these lectures, Faraday took copious notes which eventually he bound and sent to Davy. At the same time, he applied for a job with the famous man.

After this, a fairy tale-ish thing happened. On Christmas eve in 1812, Davy's carriage arrived outside of Faraday's humble residence. The driver delivered a message, asking the eager Faraday to come to the Royal Institution. In time, he was taken on as Davy's assistant.

The years spent serving in this capacity were not without their trials and humiliations. Davy's socially conscious wife never let her husband's gifted assistant forget that he was the son of a blacksmith, an untutored bumpkin, destined always to be an outsider. Instead of buying into the classism so much a part of the British culture in that time, Faraday became all the more aware of the strength of his own family's humble background and appreciative of their healthy and loving relationships.

Once when he was traveling through Europe with Lady Davy and her husband, Faraday

wrote to his mother. He told her when things became disagreeable, when he felt sick and tired, thoughts of those at home brought joy to his heart and balm to his soul.

The following passage is an implicit dig at the Lady Davys of the world: "Let those who think such thoughts useless...and paltry...I don't envy them their more refined and more estranged feelings. Let them look about the world unencumbered by such ties and heart-strings and let them laugh at those who, guided more by nature, cherish such feelings. For me, I will still cherish them in opposition to the dictates of modern refinement as the first and greatest sweetness in the life of man." This was not your detached, stereotypical scientist. This was a deeply human scientist, one destined to become famous for his pioneering experiments in electricity and magnetism, considered by many as the greatest experimentalist who ever lived.

As recognized as Faraday eventually became in the scientific establishment, he suffered the scorn of his university-trained counterparts, a scorn tinged with jealousy over Faraday's rising reputation. They were frustrated by this self-taught, experimental genius who lacked mathematical rigor. No one was more aware of his weakness in mathematical knowledge than Faraday himself. Still, he was equally aware of the pitfalls of the math approach when compared with the strength of experimentation.

In his tireless experimentation Faraday embodied the spirit of Winston Churchill's words: "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm." Toward the end of his career, this academically deficient genius had the satisfaction of having a young consummate mathematician, James Clerk Maxwell, validate his own experimental approach. Maxwell found Faraday's science untainted by abstraction. He pointed out how math could mislead when it was not grounded in experimentation. He was grateful to Faraday for sticking to his own way of investigation.

Both Maxwell and Faraday kept religious doctrine apart from their scientific pursuits. At the same time, their study of nature had a strong spiritual dimension. Neither excluded from their view that which is eternal, maintaining that "Time is a mystery which humans cannot endure to contemplate until eternal Truth enlightens it."

Faraday himself saw science as a spiritual exercise. Nothing disturbed him more than the ready acceptance of pseudo science and spiritualism, which were wildly popular in mid-19th century England. The reports of tables spinning of their own accord and ordinary people claiming magical powers and spirits visiting from beyond the grave rattled Faraday's scientific sensibilities. His religious sensibilities were offended by spiritualism. In his opinion, "God would simply not permit humans to 'peek' into the afterlife, nor would elements from that knowable realm seep into day-to-day mortal existence." He believed that "the living should ask no proof of the beneficence of God or of the promise of an afterlife. Heartfelt faith is all the assurance one should need regarding the world beyond."

Nature was an ongoing source of revelation and wonder to this reverent, humble man who began as chief bottle washer at the Royal Institution of Science. Throughout his career he consistently refused all higher office and eventually turned down the presidency of the Royal Society in 1857. As he confided to a close friend, "I must remain plain Michael Faraday to the end." In the end, Einstein would acclaim Faraday and Maxwell's electromagnetic theory as the "greatest alteration in our own conception

of the structure of reality since the foundation of theoretical physics by Newton.”

I have to confess what initially drew me to the life of Michael Faraday was not his discovery of electromagnetic induction, being neither a physicist nor chemist myself. It was more his vision, his conception of the structure of reality. He capsulized this vision in a passage that he jotted down in his diary: “Nothing is too wonderful to be true....” His biographer, Alan Hirshfeld, described these as the words of a man “who stood at the frontier of discovery and thrilled to the possibility of what lay beyond.”

The saying “Nothing is too wonderful to be true...” has become popular enough to appear on T-shirts. The sentiment resonates with the spirit of this season of wonder and mystery. There’s another saying of Faraday’s that deserves to be remembered at this time. Once, when the Prime Minister of England questioned the worth of a new discovery by asking “What good is it?,” Faraday replied, “What good is a new-born baby?” For this scientist there existed a fine line between discovery and wonder, between research and worship.

As often as I hear the expression “That’s too good to be true,” I’m reminded of Faraday’s “Nothing is too wonderful to be true.” It sounds as if he had crossed the line from science into mysticism before his time. One hundred and fifty years ago, science and religion represented two extremes between which there was no coming together, no meeting of minds.

Gary Kowalski, in his *Science and the Search for God*, addresses this rift. He says that it took decades for the philosophical implications of the new physics to begin to impact the study of religion. Then, as science “left behind the mechanistic, materialistic and reductionistic constructs that were so opposed to religious belief, a new synthesis seemed possible.”

Gary envisions the rift that divided science and religion beginning to mend. He says that “in the muddled middle, where most people search for meaning, the faith of tomorrow is in ferment .” Some have even said that “if physicists were ever finally successful in scaling the highest pinnacles of knowledge, they would discover a band of mystics already waiting at the top.”

I can imagine one of those mystics might well be Thomas Merton. Richard Kemp referred to Merton in his “This I Believe” sermon two Sundays ago. The writings of this Trappist Monk inspired Richard’s and my generation and many others to come. Merton’s vision of reality is not unlike that of Michael Faraday’s. We are fortunate that these two men kept journals, that they recorded their insights.

Merton describes in one of his journals a mystical insight that he had at a critical time in his spiritual life. It happened while he was on an errand in Louisville, Kentucky. He tells us the exact place: “...at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district.”

It might just as well have happened in Burlington, Vermont at the corner of Cherry and Church. Thomas Merton describes it in this way: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world of renunciation and holiness.”

All at once Merton knew himself to be one with the human race—not simply in sin, but in grace. He said, “There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun... There are no strangers!” If this sounds too good to be true, Michael Faraday would assure us that “Nothing is too wonderful to be true.”

May the vision of these two kindred spirits expand our own hearts and minds in this holy season. May we remember that if we, in all of our diversity, can continue to come together, to wonder, to worship, to love and to forgive, then All is Possible!