

Call to Worship:

Let every action be in harmony with your soul
And let loving lead your soul.
Don't worry so much about your body.
God sewed that robe. Leave it as it is.
Let us be more deeply courageous.
Let us change our souls.
--Rumi

A Contribution to Statistics

Wisława Szymborska

Translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak

Out of a hundred people
those who always know better
-- fifty-two

doubting every step
-- nearly all the rest,

glad to lend a hand
if it doesn't take too long
-- as high as forty-nine,

always good
because they can't be otherwise
-- four, well maybe five,

able to admire without envy
-- eighteen,

suffering illusions
induced by fleeting youth
-- sixty, give or take a few,

not to be taken lightly
-- forty and four,

living in constant fear
of someone or something
-- seventy-seven,

capable of happiness
-- twenty-something tops,

harmless singly, savage in crowds
-- half at least,

cruel
when forced by circumstances
-- better not to know
even ballpark figures,

wise after the fact
-- just a couple more
than wise before it,

taking only things from life
-- thirty
(I wish I were wrong),

hunched in pain,
no flashlight in the dark
-- eighty-three
sooner or later,

righteous
-- thirty-five, which is a lot,

righteous
and understanding
-- three,

worthy of compassion
-- ninety-nine,

mortal
-- a hundred out of a hundred.
Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

A Word on Statistics

Wisława Szymborska
translated by Joanna Trzeciak

Out of every hundred people,
those who always know better:
fifty-two.
Unsure of every step:
almost all the rest.

Ready to help,
if it doesn't take long:
forty-nine.

Always good,
because they cannot be otherwise:
four -- well, maybe five.
Able to admire without envy:
eighteen.

Led to error
by youth (which passes):
sixty, plus or minus.

Those not to be messed with:
four-and-forty.

Living in constant fear
of someone or something:
seventy-seven.

Capable of happiness:
twenty-some-odd at most.

Harmless alone,
turning savage in crowds:
more than half, for sure.

Cruel
when forced by circumstances:
it's better not to know,
not even approximately.

Wise in hindsight:
not many more
than wise in foresight.

Getting nothing out of life except things:
thirty
(though I would like to be wrong).

Balled up in pain
and without a flashlight in the dark:
eighty-three, sooner or later.

Those who are just:
quite a few, thirty-five.

But if it takes effort to understand:
three.

Worthy of empathy:
ninety-nine.

Mortal:
one hundred out of one hundred --
a figure that has never varied yet.

Sermon: The Rest of Us

Always good
because they can't be otherwise
-- four, well maybe five.

So this is a sermon for the rest of us; as Stewardship sermons are often described: "The Sermon on the Amount."

The poet's statistics describe a number of majorities and minorities that human beings might find themselves in. Let's say we happen to find ourselves in the majorities she describes. So then, we are:

Often envious.
Not always good, though we try otherwise.
We have something we are afraid of.
We hope to get more out of life than things.
We have been in pain, terrible hopeless pain.
We have been unjust, and refused to try to understand.
We are worthy of compassion.
And we are all, without exception, going to die.

You probably thought this sermon couldn't get any worse. First, it's about money, and now secondly, it is about death? This is why no one wants to talk to the minister at parties.

Our worship theme this month is "Work" and Stewardship is work. I know our Stewardship team would agree, given the amount of time and energy they have already put into mailings, phone calls, visits, emails, brochures, the Stewardship Dinner last night, and much more.

And Stewardship is work for the rest of us, too, because Stewardship asks us to think about some difficult things. Money, yes, and how much we can pledge, of course, but also this season asks us: Am I a generous person? Do I want to be? What does that even mean, for me?

What do I hope to leave behind, at the end of my life? How do I wish to be remembered? Am I at peace with the choices I make, large and small, public and private?

These are spiritual and religious questions.

The poet David Whyte consults with businesses and Fortune 500 companies on how to make work meaningful. He writes:

[O]ne of the great disciplines of any human life is
the discipline of memory,
of remembering what is essential
in the midst of our business and busyness.
The human soul thrives on
and finds courage from
the difficult intimacies of belonging.
But it is almost as if,
afraid of those primary intimacies,
we have unconsciously created a work world
so secondary, so complex,

and so busy and bullied by surface forces
that embroiled in those surface difficulties,
we have the perfect busy excuse
not to wrestle with
the more essential difficulties of existence...¹

Part of my work is to push people to scrape away some of those perfect busy excuses not to wrestle with the more essential difficulties of existence. One realm where this is important is when I am meeting with a couple for pre-marital counseling. Often, couples are so embroiled in the surface difficulties of planning a *wedding* that they are quite successful in avoiding the difficult intimacy of discussing their *marriage*.

When I do pre-marital counseling with couples whose wedding I am going to officiate, I always talk with them about their beliefs and feelings around money. I ask them to disclose all their debts and investments to each other. I ask them to share their big dreams in life—and what sort of financial saving, spending, or sharing would help get them there. If they really believe in “til death do us part” then they need to be on the same page, financially.

My colleagues who have been ministers far longer than me, tell me that the toughest conversations they used to have in pre-marital counseling were about sex. But nowadays, the toughest conversation is often about money.

Money symbolizes a lot.

It symbolizes security and safety.

It symbolizes freedom and autonomy.

It is a tool for living our values.

Through money, we can exert our power or feel controlled by others.

Through money, we can send a message to make our emotions clear.

¹ David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, page 23

The way we manage our money tells other people if we are feeling joy or anger, gratitude or resentment, trust or distrust.

I've often heard people wonder why we would ever talk about money in church. The question is often inspired by the offertory: why do we take an offering in worship—literally bring out our wallets, touch money (the phrase “filthy lucre” comes to mind)—as part of our time of worship? Behind that question is the bigger question: should spirituality and faith be totally separate from money? Isn't money kind of a “dirty” topic, one to be avoided in polite conversation?

Ah, trick question. I think church is actually a good place to get beyond “polite” conversation. To get deep. To get our hands dirty with the difficult stuff. To talk about money and death and hate and suffering and forgiveness and hope. (And sex—after all, we are one of the few religions with a comprehensive sex ed curriculum!)

We come here to grapple with who we are as human beings; not simply in this one hour together, but in every moment of our lives.

As Rumi said, “Let every action be in harmony with your soul.”

When we cut someone off in traffic
or when we let them go ahead of us;
when we smile at the checkout clerk
or roll our eyes at their slowness;
when we snap at our spouse
or bite our tongue;
when we assume the worst of someone's intentions
instead of holding out the possibility that they meant no harm:

All of those little choices make up who we are. They add up.

And all the ways we interact with money—

how we make it, spend it, share it, save it—
and all the things we believe about money—
that’s part of who we are, too.

There is a lesson here from a Japanese Zen Master, Hakuin Ekaku, who lived about 300 years ago.² He is considered to be a great sage and a patriarch of Zen Buddhism. As a young student Hakuin wanted to devote himself entirely to Zen. To attempt this full devotion, he thought he needed to forcefully reject “all worldly concerns.” But, in trying to reject worldly concerns—such as his bodily needs and basic daily activities—he found himself less and less able to wholeheartedly practice Zen. In fact, the more he tried to ignore the world, and spend all day every day in silent seated meditation, the sicker he got. He wrote:

Trivial and mundane matters pressed against my chest and a fire mounted in my heart. My manner became irascible and fears assailed me. Both my mind and body felt continually weak, sweat poured ceaselessly from my armpits, and my eyes constantly filled with tears.

In trying to reject the needs of the world, the needs of his body and everyday life, he had broken his connection to his religious practice as well.

All this changed the way he understood Zen Buddhism. As a teacher and Zen Master, Hakuin is now known for teaching his followers to seek Zen in all their daily activities, from the most profound to the most mundane. And he chastised his fellow monks when they ignored the needs of the world by spending too much time set apart, sitting in silent meditation. He called that “dead sitting.” One scholar describes Hakuin’s teachings this way:

² Information on Hakuin found in the wonderful book *Zen Action, Zen Person* by T. P. Kasulis. Chapter 8, pages 104-124 are on Hakuin and his legacy.

Zen is not only carried out in a quiet place separated from the activities of the world; it must permeate one's existence as the source of everything one does. ... True meditation [comes] in the midst of activity.

Hakuin put it this way:

What is this true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action, the evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into one single *koan*.

A koan is a teaching that is meant to bring us towards enlightenment. Hakuin taught that everything we do and experience can be a teaching that brings us towards enlightenment.

Let every action be in harmony with your soul.

If we want to be a generous person, we act generously. If we want to be a kind person, we act with kindness. When we slip up, we try again. Each action is a way we make our life matter.

And so our relationship with money, the way we spend and save and share, that too is part of our spiritual journey.

I think Szymborska was too conservative in her statistics. I think her descriptions are true for most people, even the ones that seem paradoxical.

She wrote that out of 100 people there are 52 who always know better, and all the rest are unsure of every step.

For me, there are times when I really think I know better, (whether or not I actually do).

And there are plenty of times when I am unsure of every step.
She writes:

Ready to lend a hand,
if it doesn't take long:
forty-nine.

I want to believe I am always ready to lend a hand—and most of the time I am—except when I am in a hurry...or sleepy...or hungry...

Fearful, happy, harmless, cruel, wise, just, unjust, in terrible pain—this is the human condition. And so when Szymborska says that 99 people out of 100 are worthy of compassion and empathy, I would say we all are. We are all worthy of compassion and empathy, and we are all mortal.

100 out of 100, this figure remains unchanged.

With the lessons from Hakuin,
perhaps we can transform
what seem like surface difficulties into opportunities
for primary intimacy,
for spiritual growth,
for holding our life up to the light and asking if we are living it the way
we really wish.

And so the “Sermon on the Amount” my friends, becomes a sermon on the amount of goodness and kindness and compassion we can bring into the world.

And maybe that turns into giving away an amount of money that stretches your heart wider.

For me and Ben, last year, that amount was \$2,500. This year, it will be \$3,000.

That certainly doesn't put us into the highest category of givers. But it gets us up past the median and the average, and it asks us to stretch.

I'll tell you how we got there. Ben and I were having that long talk about our pledge. We were considering the childcare costs, the new mortgage, the retirement savings, the college savings, and taxes. (If I'm talking about money and death, I have to mention taxes.) And then there is the *stuff* that would be nice to have.

Considering all that, Ben put a challenge to me, a choice. And so now you know that when it comes to getting new bedside tables, or upping my pledge by 20%, the pledge won immediately.

Because when I think about my life, I would rather say, "I am as generous as I can be to my church" than say "I am a person with matching bedside tables."

For me, Stewardship is about accountability. It is about generosity. It is an annual chance to make sure I am practicing what I preach. And maybe it is for you, too.

And so I pray for each one of us, 100 out of 100:

May our every action be in harmony with our souls
And let loving lead our souls.
Let us be more deeply courageous.
Let us change our souls.

Amen.