

REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF A COCKROACH

A Sermon by Ron Knapp, Minister Emeritus

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Part One

DON MARQUIS AND ARCHY

Don Marquis --a schoolteacher, an actor, a reporter, a poet and a playwright -- once remarked: "It would be one on me if I should be remembered longest for creating a cockroach character." It was one on him. Don Marquis wrote the powerful poem with which I opened this service and two of the hymns found in our hymnal. I am going to read one of them at the end of these introductory remarks, "A Fierce Unrest," and I am going to read the other, "Have I Not Known," as the closing words. But even for Unitarian Universalists he is best known for creating Archy, the cockroach.

Archy is a Cockroach. Mehitabel is a cat. And they are two of the characters created by Don Marquis, which first appeared in his column in the New York Sun, in the decade following World War One.

Archy, the cockroach, is the reincarnation of a free verse poet. To give expression to his deeply rooted poetic insights, Archy climbs up onto Don Marquis's typewriter, in the middle of the night, when the office is empty, and leaves, the next morning, a fresh bit of wisdom, a new poem.

Archy jumps up and down to create his poems but as a cockroach he is not heavy enough to operate the shift levers and, therefore, he cannot use capital letters and punctuation marks. Archy is, as you might expect, rather difficult to read.

What Archy writes about is the other insects and various creatures that populate his world. In the course of his experiences, Archy has encounters with a lot of characters, including a mother spider who laments the fact that human beings have invented such ingenious ways of killing flies that her family has been reduced to starvation; a lightning bug who is so proud of his "lightning" that he thinks he could be the statue of liberty if only he had an island; a ladybug, rescued by Archy from drowning in a beef stew, who turns into a clinging vine; a cricket who, with his constant "cheerup", "cheerup", is so damned optimistic that Archy can't stand him: a lamb who was threatened by a wolf and rescued by a human being who, after carrying on about the cruelty of wolves, says grace and has the lamb for dinner.

There are other characters --we will look at a moth, a toad, a robin and a worm, and a spider and a fly in a moment -- but chief among all is Mehitabel the cat. We are not going to

deal much with Mehitabel this morning, but perhaps I ought to at least introduce you to her.

Mehitabel, or so she says at least -- and Archy appears to have some doubt -- is the reincarnation of Cleopatra, a great lady. And she is, furthermore, a lady of the world: singing and dancing and having a great time. Mehitabel is her own person. And that person is one for whom "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die," is a philosophy of life. Mehitabel is a hedonist. "Toujours gai, "toujours gai" is her motto. Archy narrates the song of Mehitabel.

i know that I am bound
for a journey down the sound
in the midst of a refuse mound
but wotthehell wotthehell
oh, i should worry and fret
death and i will coquette
theres a dance in the old dame yet
toujours gai toujours gai

the things that i had not ought to
i do because ive got to
wotthehell wotthehell
and i end with my favorite motto
toujours gai toujours gai

Archy ends that song with an editorial comment: "boss sometimes i think that our friend mehitabel is a trifle too gay." Another song of mehitabel ends with this editorial comment, "it appears to me boss that mehitabel is far from being the quiet and domestic character you and i had hoped she might become." There is more than a sexist content to that last idea, however, for Archy, himself is a "quiet and domestic character." If Mehitabel is the hedonist, Archy is the stoic. One of Mehitabel's favorite expressions is "wotthehell, wotthehell", but Archy is really too cautious to say "What the Hell". Mehitabel lives life as it comes, Archy is one to plan, and to think things through. Using some popular, and current imagery, Mehitabel is right brained and Archy is left brained.

Archy is, I think, Don Marquis himself, an extension of his ego, the representation of his "style" of being. Mehitabel is his alter ego, the other side of himself, the self which he only occasionally permits to surface. Archy is the solid, stable, thinking person in Don Marquis, and Mehitabel is that part of himself that says, "let go, Don, kick over the traces now and then." And yet the perennial rags to riches, and riches to rags, existence of Mehitabel does not seem all that enticing either. One day Mehitabel is the mistress of a rich tom cat and lives a life that is one party after another; the next day she is back in the garbage can in the alley having another litter of kittens.

What Don Marquis is dealing with in Archy and Mehitabel is the fundamental contradictions which seem to be at the

core of human existence, a contradiction which finds expression in every human personality. That contradiction is sometimes represented by the contrast between the Apolonian side of our personality and the Dionysian side of our personality, and which can, perhaps, be more readily described as the struggle between "I want" and "I should".

Don Marquis pushes these contradictory elements of human nature to ultimate and to cosmic dimensions, into the contradictory realms of "being" and "non being", into a meaningful universe in the context of a meaningless universe. There is, Don Marquis suggests in his poem, "a fierce unrest...at the core of all existing things," an unrest which is resolved only in the dreams and deeds of living things.

A fierce unrest seethes at the core
Of all existing things:
It was the eager wish to soar
That gave the gods their wings.

From what flat wastes of cosmic slime,
And stung by what quick fire,
Starward the restless races climb!--
Men risen out of mire.

There throbs through all the worlds that are
This heart-beat hot and strong;
And shaken systems, star by star,
Awake and glow in song.

But for the urge of this unrest
These joyous spheres are mute;
But for the rebel in his breast
Had man remained a brute.

When baffled lips demanded speech,
Speech trembled into birth--
(One day the lyric word shall reach
From earth to laughing earth,)--

When man's dim eyes demanded light,
The light he sought was born:
His wish, a Titan, scaled the height
And flung him back the morn!

From deed to dream, from dream to deed,
From daring hope to hope,
The restless wish, the instant need,
Still lashed him up the slope!

I sing no governed firmament,
Cold, ordered, regular:
I sing the stinging discontent
That leaps from star to star!

Part Two
"WARTY BLYGGINS THE TOAD"
"THE LESSON OF THE MOTH"

Some of you, I expect, are familiar with one or both of these selections from Archy and Mehitabel. You may know of them both from your own reading or from the fact that I have used them, from time to time, to illustrate various sermons.

I first became familiar with "Warty Blyggins the Toad" from an anthology and it did not include the whole poem. It ended with these words, "ask rather, said warty blyggins, what the universe has done to deserve me." I like it that way, romantic as I sometimes am, but it did not contain the pathos, and the problem, that is inherent in Archy's view of the world. It does not contain those important last lines about the "similar absurdities ...lodged in the crinkles of the human cerebrum."

Here again, is that eternal struggle between self importance and self negation found in the Jewish proverb, which I mentioned last week. That proverb says that a person should go through life with two notes, in each of two different pockets, and, from time to time, reach in the pocket and read one or the other of the two notes. One note says "I am the center of the universe." The other note says "I am dust and ashes." Here again is the internal conflict between the Apollo of our being and the Dionysus of our being, the conflict between the romantic and the realist.

When I am in my "romantic" mode, my sympathies are with Warty Blyggins and not with the realism of Archy's philosophy. When I am in my "romantic" mode my sympathies are with the ecstasy of the moth and not with Archy's "crinkles in the human cerebrum."

One of my favorite poems, from a romantic perspective, comes from Carl Sandburg. It is called, simply, "Joy".

Let a joy keep you.
Reach out your hands
And take it when it runs by,
As the Apache dancer
Clutches his woman.
I have seen them
Live long and laugh loud,
Sent on singing, singing,
Smashed to the heart
Under the ribs
With a terrible love.
Joy always,
Joy everywhere--
Let joy kill you!
Keep away from the little deaths.

"Let joy kill you!." That's a great line. "Keep away from the little deaths." That's another great line. But

when I move out of my "romantic" mode, When I activate my left brain, when I utilize the "crinkles of my cerebrum, there is something that tells me keep away from the "big" deaths as well as the "little" ones. There is something that tells me that the meaning of life is not found only in magnifying the "joy", but in accepting the sorrow, not only in reveling in the ecstasy but in dealing with the ordinary.

Archy has a powerful philosophic message in those ending lines from "The Lesson of the Moth", after the moth had immolated himself on a patent cigar lighter.

i do not agree with him
myself i would rather have
half the happiness and twice
the longevity

but at the same time i wish
there was something i wanted
as badly as he wanted to fry himself

The power of that philosophic message, it seems to me, comes from the core of human life itself, from something inherent in our physiology, or at least imprinted in our very being. I am thinking about what seems to be an inherent and natural need in human beings, for adventure or new experience, on the one hand, and for security and for familiar experience, on the other. The resolution of such contradictory needs, in human experience, calls for a return to something like that which Aristotle called "the golden mean", to something which can best be described by a word that has grown out of favor, in recent years, especially with Unitarian Universalists: "temperance." Temperance may not be such a bad word after all. It does seem to be descriptive of that which Don Marquis leaves, if his ego and alter ego should ever get together, as a legacy from Archy and Mehitabel.

Part Three
"THE ROBIN AND THE WORM"
"A SPIDER AND A FLY"

At the core of this "philosophy of a cockroach" is a terrible, and for many, a terrifying realism. That realism is expressed, in the last few lines of the poems just read. In the case of "The Robin and the Worm" it is found in these words: "for you are going to be eaten." In "A Spider and the Fly" it is found in these words: "but the end would have been just the same if neither of us had spoken at all."

That terrible realism which lies at the core of Archy's philosophy -- a realism that appears more palatable to us when it is presented in the form of humor -- is a realism formed out of contemporary understandings of nature and the universe, understandings that become involved in the process of defining who we are. Perhaps that thought can be made clearer by going back a few centuries to the time of Galileo.

Galileo, who developed the notion for the modern world that the earth revolved around the sun, also outdated the notion that the earth, the human habitat, was at the center of the universe. The established religion of that time suppressed Galileo's findings, not because they were unaware of the truth he had discovered -- I expect that they knew that only too well -- but because it would provide a massive dislocation of the human place in the cosmos, and diminished the status of the church. After Galileo we could not honestly think of ourselves as the central characters in the cosmic drama.

As time went on, and we learned more about the physical universe, the human being was moved further and further from the center of the universe until he found himself on an obscure planet, revolving around a second rate star, in a remote corner of the universe. Human beings found themselves in a system of life that gave them precious little preeminence. The human being was just one of numerous evolved creatures who come into, and go out of, existence, each feeding on the other. What Archy discovers, and which Don Marquis expresses, is that we live in world where we can no longer see ourselves only as observers of nature, observers watching all other creatures eating still other creatures, ourselves always excluded. We are part of it. We are the eaters and we are the eaten.

Archy's philosophy seems to me to be in the tradition of Nietzsche who tried to deal with this terrible reality by using theological terms: "God is dead." And in the tradition of Bertrand Russell who realizes that nothing that is of value to him can survive the death of the solar system. And in that whole system called "existentialism" which sees a fundamental meaninglessness at the core of the universe, as the fact of existence. Archy represents a realism that cannot make the romantic affirmation which Longfellow, in a earlier epoch, could make. "Life is real! Life is earnest", Longfellow begins, and I believe that Archy, at this point would say "Amen." But the balance of the poem would seem too unrealistic and too romantic, "And the grave is not the goal; dust thou art, to dust returneth. was not spoken of the soul."

Archy, it seems to me, and in his own cockroachian language to be sure, expresses the belief, along with the existentialists, that we are thrown back upon ourselves. Archy appears to believe that the meaning that exists in things is the meaning we give to things, that the meaning a universe possesses is a meaning generated by, and created by, the dreams that we have and the deeds that we do.

Archy, it seems to me, confronts us with a world like the world we are in the process of discovering. And what are we to do with such a world? How are we to live in world where we are called, in Archy's words, "to believe that everything is for you until discover you are for it." Or

again, in Archy's words, "sing your faith in what you get to eat right up to the minute you are eaten." What are we to do with such a world?

Some years ago, in preparation for another sermon, I wrote a parable that attempted to provide something of an answer to that question. I liked it so much that I am going to share it with you as I conclude these remarks. It may not answer the question, "what are we to do with such a world," but it may provide a hint about resources that are available to us as we go about seeking an answer.

Imagine, if you will, that an airplane full of people has crash landed in some remote, wilderness place. No one is seriously injured in this accident, but the plane's radios have been destroyed so that there is no way to make contact with the outside world.

At first, for many days, the people remain close to the aircraft, convinced that it will only be a matter of time before they will be rescued. But as the weeks pass, doubt begins to creep into the minds of some of the people and a continuous debate develops between the people over whether they will, or will not, be rescued. As more time passes, the debate grows more and more intense, because survival is predicated upon the choices they will make. Should they remain close to the downed aircraft, hoping for rescue, or should they launch out into the unknown wilderness that surrounds them? As time continues to go by, more and more people become convinced --they know in their bones --that they are not going to be rescued, that they are indeed thrown back upon themselves and their own resources, that survival is not in somebody else's hands but in their own hands.

Hope of rescue dies, but that does not mean the end of hope. The company launches out into the unknown and that is a very scary thing to do. But even if it is scary, it is no longer a cause for despair. Life is to be lived and they do have their keen human intellects, their strong human bodies, the resources of collective knowledge gained from the past, the strength of human relationships and human interactions, and the resources of both mind and earth.

They launch out, negating the hope of rescue, but affirming the hope of life. And one can hope that in the end, they will do more than survive. One can hope that they will overcome.