

## Constraint-Based Living

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All Souls NYC

During a concert that has gone down in history, the great violinist Yitzhak Perlman broke a string. Rather than stopping to replace it, he kept playing, finding the melodies on the remaining strings. When the piece was finished, the astounded audience gave him a standing ovation and clamored for him to speak. He approached the microphone and simply said, “It is our task to make music with what remains.” He was, of course, on the most literal level, referring to what remained of his violin. He may also have been referring to what remained of his health since he contracted polio at age four and walks with crutches and leg braces. He plays the violin sitting down. Metaphorically he may have meant -- make a life of beauty with what remains to each of us after our storms leave us drenched, battered, and diminished.

I was a Music major in college, and I remember taking a composition class in which the professor taught us to write Gregorian chants. There were really just a few simple rules, which, if you followed them resulted in something that sounded surprisingly a lot like a Gregorian chant. They had to do with the aesthetic sensibilities of 11<sup>th</sup>-century Europe – certain favored intervals between notes and the kinds of chords that were used and not used. For example you could never, ever, ever use the interval known as “the devil’s interval” [play the tritone] -- this was Satan’s music. All of us in the class were able to write pieces that were “correct” in the sense of following the musical conventions. But the real challenge of the assignment was to work within the aesthetic constraints to create something beautiful. Something meaningful. And many of us did. It was an amazing lesson in how constraints themselves inspire creativity.

Constraints can be so helpful to the creative process that many artists create artificial constraints within which to do their work. French author George Perec’s 300-page novel, *La Disparition*, was written

without the use of the letter “e.” Its English translation is also without the letter “e.” NYU professor Louis Bury is currently writing a constraint-based dissertation about constraint-based writing. He also writes poetry while riding the New York subway system. The rules are: Each stop he writes one line, each transfer is a new stanza. No rewrites. Here’s one of his poems that I like:

What genre  
of pulchritude  
what fable  
of conviction  
fires your  
puttering engine?

Voluntary constraints are also known by religious teachers to promote spiritual growth. Take Ramadan, for example. For this month, Muslims do not eat or drink between sunrise and sundown. This extended discipline of fasting is intended to bring you closer to God and open your heart to the plight of the hungry in the world like those now in Somalia. Your soul is enriched by a physical deprivation. Similarly, with Jewish and Christian Sabbath practices in which you don’t work or spend money on the Sabbath, the constraint focuses your attention on prayer, on your loved ones, and on gratitude for all the blessings you have. The work and errands that you would otherwise do in seven days has to get squeezed into six, and so those six days become, by necessity, more productive.

Most of us in this room, however, do not voluntarily constrain ourselves in any of these ways. In fact we seek to eliminate constraints from our lives as much as possible. (For some, our attraction to Unitarian Universalism is part of that ongoing quest). And yet, constrained we remain. Like it or not, life is full of constraints – financial constraints, health constraints, constraints based on our abilities and aptitudes, constraints based on our gender or sex, constraints based on the technology available in the time and place we were born, constraints based on our responsibilities to children, to parents, to people we love. We work within these constraints, we seek to overcome them, we gripe about them. But they are often immovable. They form the absolute boundaries of the possible in our lives.

We humans respond to our constraints in a variety of ways. Some of us fight against them directly. The

danger of this approach is that your whole life can come to revolve around what you see as your deficit, whatever it may be. I once knew a high school track athlete – a girl who was large and very strong. Her coaches tried to steer her toward the shot put event but she, wanting to be small and fast and light, insisted on training for the pole vault. She was determined and she worked and practiced harder than anyone else on the team. But she was continually injuring herself and never excelled at the pole vault. It was a constant source of pain for her, a talented and committed athlete whose life became about the one thing she could not do.

On the other hand, it can be a noble thing to fight directly against one's constraints, especially when the constraints in question are part of a larger system of social injustice. An underpaid teacher, pained at his inability to contribute money to help people suffering in Somalia, might rally the teachers' union or enter the political fray to fight for higher wages for all teachers.

Some of us, less nobly, use our constraints as alibis for our failure to pursue our dreams or to live up to our values. The teacher might say, for example, "I can't do anything about Somalia; I work as a teacher and barely make enough money to feed my own family."

A third group of people accepts and reimagines their constraints. If you are in this group, you imagine that instead of being imposed on you from the outside, your constraints are ones you've chosen, like an artist deciding on the boundaries within which he is going to work. This approach gives you a surprising wealth of freedom in creatively shaping your life. Instead of bemoaning the fact that you can't do the thing you from which you are constrained, you intentionally look "out of the box," at possibilities and potentials in entire categories that you've never even considered. You see your life as an art project that you intend to make beautiful, powerful, meaningful, and unique. You follow the model of Yitzhak Perlman who, because his disability was such that he was never going to be a pole vaulter, found something that he could do exceedingly well sitting down.

I believe that happenstance often guides us toward our best gifts. If you seek your spiritual fortunes in

the flow of your life, rather than trying to swim upstream, you can often find your true talents and most loving self emerging. You embrace your own abundance with gratitude, charged by all that you *are*, rather than what you are not; all that you *can* do, rather than what you cannot.

The teacher, in our example from earlier, might decide that his salary is what it is. That's his constraint. He cannot afford to contribute any money to help alleviate the famine in Somalia. But rather than give up on doing anything to help at all, he will empower his students to take on the issue. He will infuse them with his passion for justice, teach them about all the underlying social structures that exacerbate a famine like this one, and communicate his outrage that children are dying because of politics. He will start a student group for justice and healing in Somalia and teach the students how to speak about this issue, how to raise money and advocate for social change. Maybe his group of passionate students will then want to start chapters in other high schools and soon this student effort spreads far and wide, raising millions of dollars, and educating Americans across the country.

*Your constraints are the rules of your game of life.* A game that is unique to you. How can you use these rules, like an artist, to fuel your creativity, to channel your work, to focus you? How can you use them to find out what really drives you? Where is your passion that, if constricted in one place, will burst out somewhere else? What genre of pulchritude, what fable of conviction fires your puttering engine? These are crucial questions to ask ourselves if we want our constraints to work for us rather than against us.

Of course, to speak of constraints working “for” us is a privilege of someone like myself who has relatively few. It is important to remember that on the continuum of constraints, the kinds faced by most of us in this room are relatively minor. Not all constraints are productive constraints. An obvious example is the famine in Somalia. Lack of food is not a productive constraint. Billions of people in this world suffer body- and soul-crushing constraints that make survival the only possible goal. Self-actualization, creativity – these cannot even enter the picture. It is said that suffering is like salt – it's good to have a little bit in your dish to add flavor, but too much salt can ruin a meal, just as too much

suffering can ruin a life.

The ultimate constraint on all our lives, of course, is that they end. We will all die, and this fact gives a meaning and urgency to our living that would be otherwise impossible. Forrest Church was known for saying that religion itself is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

Despite humankind's long quest for immortality, imagine how empty life would feel if you knew you were going to live forever. There would never be any reason not to just sit on your couch and watch TV all day. Tomorrow would be just another day when you could set in motion all the great ideas you had, and those tomorrows would stretch out to eternity. As in the Chaim Potok story that Sahm read of the dead bird, something that is yours forever is never precious.

And so life is precious because it ends and the stakes are high because we cannot do everything we want to do. There is not enough time, not enough resources; we do not have enough strength, enough knowledge. There is cruelty and loss, war and heartache. If we feel that the world is taking too much from us, we are right; we are drenched, battered and diminished by the storms of life. But it is our task to live a full and passionate life nonetheless. It is our task to find new connections as the old shut down, new hope as our old hopes fail us, new gifts with which to heal the world. It is our task to accept ourselves with our limitations and thereby discover our true genius. It is our task to make music with what remains.