

## The Limiting Script of Expectations

Summer is a time for me of foolish optimism. Every year, I have so many plans and projects for July and August—a mere two months—plans and projects I would never presume to have for any other pair of consecutive months. And right about now, at the beginning of August, with back-to-school ads already pressing September, I get the sinking reminder that I need to adjust my expectations.

Expectations. We have so many, don't we?

About how things should go, how we should be, how others should behave, what should happen, what's acceptable. So many expectations embedded with judgment.

It has been said that “expectations are premediated resentments.”

How often are we disappointed, upset, even straight up angry when things don't go as we think they should?

And yet we can think it's the circumstances that have failed us rather than our expectations.

Many of you, I'm sure, have heard that humorous truism: If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.

Plans are deliberate, clear to identify. But expectations are more subtle and subversive. They establish themselves so easily it's hard to realize we have them until they're undermined, which let's face it, they so often are.

Akin to wish and hope, expectations are their more presumptuous cousin. When we wish for something, we know we are engaged in magical thinking. And while

hope is rigorous and complicated, hoping is somewhat innocent and naive. We often cast it like a wish. I hope it won't rain tomorrow. I hope I'll win the lottery. But expectations . . . well, expect. They presume without being aware that they may have no right to. Indeed, they can be blind to themselves.

They are often cloaked in habit. But this is the way we always do it.

My mother tells the story of my father and four-year-old brother being caught in a torrential downpour that flooded the streets of Buenos Aires, Argentina where we lived at the time, temporarily stranding them in the car. When my father explained the situation to my brother, he protested saying, "But it's my dinner time."

Expectations make it hard for us to accept what is. Make it hard, even, to see what things really are.

In the top drawer of my dresser at home are two small, well-loved stuffed animals from my childhood, Koaly and Penzie. Koaly, you won't be surprised to hear, is a koala bear. And Penzie, in my head, though never fully articulated, is a penguin. Well, that is to say, until my daughter pointed out to me just recently that Penzie is, in fact, an owl. Once she said, there it was Penzie was clearly an owl. But it stunned me to realize how long I had lived with this plain-as-day misconception.

As scientists and magicians know we often see what we are primed to see rather than what our brains actually see. And we fill in what is not there.

Expectations make it hard to take things on their own terms.

Think of an instance when you have watched or listened or tasted something and not liked it at first, and then later found you did. Sometimes things are genuinely not to our liking. But sometimes, they are simply not what we had in mind.

I struggled with my expectations in the writing of this sermon. The first and last time I gave a sermon at the end of March, the writing went fairly well, so, even though I knew this time around would be different, especially given I was much busier in July than I was in March, I couldn't keep myself from feeling nervous when my sermon-writing experience wasn't matching my previous one.

Expectations circumscribe our experiences, often predetermining our reactions or behavior. They have power. We know they are the key component of the placebo effect.

We see them at work with the expectancy bias, when a researcher unconsciously influences the subject of an experiment.

We have likely experienced them with the Pygmalion effect or its opposite the Golem effect that Professor of Psychology, Robert Rosenthal defined as "the phenomenon whereby one person's expectation for another person's behavior comes to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy." A student, for instance, is positively influenced by the high expectations her teacher has for her. Or an employee is negatively affected by the low expectations his boss has for him.

We know expectations play a big part in our professional and personal relationships.

Children feel the weight of their parents' expectations and often labor to avoid their disappointment.

And who hasn't grappled with conflicting or unrealistic expectations in a romantic relationship? I often think of the episode on the sitcom *Friends* when Ross explains to Chandler how to effectively handle a situation with Chandler's girlfriend Janice. Ross offers Chandler two options for what to do and then indicates that both are wrong because the real answer is secret option 3. We can do this, can't we, want our partners to figure out our secret option 3, the thing we really want but haven't stated. It's even reflected in the way we express our disappointment. "Oh, I guess I thought . . ." We thought but didn't say.

But sometimes our expectations are so explicit that they become demands. In my mid-thirties, I tried internet dating. While I know it works for many people, I became troubled by the list of expectations that some men had for how a woman should look, dress, and behave. A woman that is an 8 1/2 minimum out of 10 demanded one man. She must like the outdoors (but not be earthy) required another. My feet don't smell and neither should yours stated yet another who liked foot massages.

Secret option 3, a list of dating requirements: these are about having our own specific needs met.

But as we know, *relationships* don't work this way. Any long-term relationship is a matter of adjusting our expectations.

When we were first married, my husband, bless his heart, expected that because we loved each other, we would just effortlessly and without discussion work out who would do what household chores. Like Mary Poppins spoonful of sugar, love

would make it easy. Well, we all know, I think, what happened to those expectations.

In long-term relationships we make room for others.

When I first started rolling up my sleeves at South Church, bumping up against the realities of what's involved in maintaining any organization, I remember feeling like the honeymoon was over. South Church would no longer be my own private affair of just the easy bits. I was now negotiating my expectations with those of others. (Sigh.) Marriage is like that, isn't it?

It is useful for me to consider what I expected when I came to South Church. In coming through those doors, I was testing it out. Did I like being here? Did it offer me the magical combination of comfort, renewal, and uplift that I was looking for? Did it have what I considered the *good* parts of church without the *bad* parts of church? In other words, did it meet my very specific though unexpressed expectations? And I apologize here, but at that point, I wasn't thinking very much about all of your needs.

But truth be told, I wonder if I've really gotten much better in this regard. This is particularly true when after a service I've just attended, I consider whether it held my attention, spoke to me, lived up to my expectations.

In that mindset, I forget the effort that went into that service. I forget that many of the people who contributed to the service were donating their time. I forget that the service is a kind of offering and not required to meet my expectations.

Considered differently, I realize that instead of expecting more of others, I might ask more of myself, a greater generosity of spirit and a practice of open heartedness.

But this kind of practice is challenging when technology encourages me to believe that we live in a have-it-your-way world, as the old Burger King ad used to say. Our smart phones behave like personal assistants ready to do our bidding. Amazon turns shopping into a few easy clicks. Our playlists, Netflix queues, and newsfeeds are tailored to our interests. They confirm our taste, fulfill our expectations.

And our Google searches, what we see on Facebook, the predictive text that anticipates the next word we'll type not to mention the inescapable algorithms and pop up ads reinforce what came before. In reaffirming our expectations, they contribute to our bubbles. They exacerbate our biases. We are, cognitive researchers explain about confirmation bias, automatically inclined to confirm what we already believe and to discount or ignore that which doesn't fit with our preconceptions. And so, we develop habits of mind.

Applied philosopher, Jonathan Rowson in conversation with Krista Tippett for the podcast *On Being*, notes that we are not only creatures of habit but also "habit-creating creatures." He said, and I quote, "We actually try to make niches for ourselves where we don't have to think too much.

And convenience, in some ways, is how that manifests. And the reason that matters is that many things that are habitual and comfortable and convenient may not be that good for us, and they may not be that good for each other and for the planet, and so we need to back out of that, to find the part of us that's a

bit more free, a bit more considerate, to actually look more deeply at the habit that we're creating and ask if we can do better," he says.

Our expectations contribute to these constraining habits of mind. They confirm and narrow. And aside from their more serious implications, they can, like rigid routines and tired traditions, make life more dull and disappointing. When we get what we expect, life becomes less creative and full.

I am a big movie fan. My taste is broad if fussy. From the German film *The Lives of Others* to the first *Terminator* movie, *Harold and Maude* to the Cohen Brother's *Fargo*. *Moonlight* to *Rocketman*. You get the idea.

As any of you who have a Netflix streaming account know, when you click on a movie you're considering watching, a percentage appears. The number is meant to tell you how much Netflix thinks you will enjoy that selection. This can be helpful but also reductive. Yes, it makes guesses based on what you watched before. But every time, for example, I select a movie based on its suggestions, the algorithm reinforces a specific profile of my taste. And reduces the possibility of my encountering the unexpected, my developing a richer repertoire.

And this undermines one of the great values of art – its capacity to expand our perspective beyond the narrow confines of what we expect.

Thinking again about online dating, imagine how many of us might not have ended up with our partners or spouses if a dating algorithm or carefully created profile had given us exactly what we asked for. Consider the unexpected friendships and partnerships that look doubtful on paper but nonetheless work

very well. The beauty of human chemistry is the way it can surprise us, the way it expands our understanding.

Travel is another opportunity for expansive surprise. In leaving the familiar, travel invites us to encounter the unexpected and see with fresh eyes.

The writer Pico Iyer in his wonderful essay, "Why we Travel," observes, "the first great joy of traveling is simply the luxury of leaving all my beliefs and certainties at home, and seeing everything I thought I knew in a different light, and from a crooked angle. In that regard, even a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet (in Beijing) or a scratchy revival showing of "Wild Orchids" (on the Champs-Elysees) can be both novelty and revelation: In China, after all, people will pay a whole week's wages to eat with Colonel Sanders, and in Paris, Mickey Rourke is regarded as the greatest actor since Jerry Lewis," Iyer writes.

My brother, the inveterate adventurer and careful planner, has commented that it is often the unexpected and sometimes difficult parts of a trip that become the most memorable.

I had one of these unexpected memorable moments in 1986 when I traveled to the Soviet Union. I thought the trip would be an interesting, unusual experience. But I didn't expect it to be a humbling one. I remember wandering a small, drab department store in Moscow. It had none of the gloss and seduction of department stores I was used to. And I found nothing tempting to buy. When I walked out of the store, I encountered a woman who had also just exited. She opened her shopping bag with the purchases she'd just made and indicated that she wanted to trade anything she'd bought for anything I had on. And suddenly, I



felt ashamed, as my own casual privilege came into focus. Me, a college student, spending a year in Paris on spring break in the Soviet Union, looking to have an experience and free to leave.

Indeed, there is nothing like the unexpected to wake us up and make us grow.

And this is what life asks of us. This is what it reminds us of with every death, accident, or unexpected bit of bad news. That life is more fragile and full than our need for stability and control would have us believe.

Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:

World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think.

Louis MacNeice reminds us in his poem "Snow."

Expectations can be useful, but they are also a limiting and problematic script that we impose on each other and on life, as though life is meant give us what we want. When, in fact, there is so much about the human experience that is a mystery—much richer and more expansive than we intend. And it is in this mystery that we feel the fullness of life—complex and contradictory, multitudinous and ineffable.

There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Hamlet tells his friend.

And this is a good thing.

We are entering a new chapter at South Church. It's hard to know what to expect. How things will alter. How we might be changed in the process. May we not

always get what we expect. May we be open to the expansive surprise. And may receive more than we intended.

Blessed be.

**Now please join me in singing our final hymn #201 in the blue hymnal.**