

"Singing in the Bathtub" Reverend Alison Hyder

January 6, 2008

The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: By Nancy Wood - "Gathering Sunbeams"

The way to gather sunbeams is carefully, making sure
they do not break or become
mere shadows of your uncertainty.

The way to gather sunbeams is hopefully, bending
to catch the light between your fingers
before storm clouds devour opportunity.

The way to gather sunbeams is crazily, putting
them in your pocket if you catch any,
laughing at their feeling of mobility.

The way to gather sunbeams is joyfully, keeping
step with the dance they do across the earth,
drawing you into their world of fragility.

READING: by Bruce Marshall "Like Singing in the Bathtub"

According to the poet Allen Ginsberg, spirituality should be like singing in the bathtub. Yes, that's exactly right.

Singing in the bathtub is spontaneous. You don't have to plan for it, study for it, or fit it on your calendar. You just do it, in the midst of what you have to do anyway.

Singing in the bathtub is unselfconscious. You don't worry about how it sounds or how you look doing it or whether you've kept your skills current since the last time you sang in the bathtub. You just sing.

Singing in the bathtub can be done by anyone, not just the experts. If there are experts in singing in the bathtub, we are mercifully free of knowing who they are. In this endeavor, we're all equal.

Sometimes we use the image of a journey to articulate the process of developing our spirituality. We picture a long and treacherous path along which we are introduced to experiences and trials and truths that guide us on our way. That's a good image - I draw on it myself from time to time. But it's not like singing in the bathtub.

When asked by a disciple how he could experience God, a Sufi mystic slipped off his tunic and stepped into the pouring rain. Lying on the grass he opened his mouth and spread his arms. "That's how," he said.

Standing in the rain. Lying in the grass. Walking in the snow. Being present to our breathing and the heartbeat of the person next to us. Approaching our lives with spontaneity, with a lack of self-consciousness, with simplicity. That's how we may experience our relationship with the force that gives us life.

SERMON: "Singing in the Bathtub" - Rev. Alison Hyder

We should make all spiritual talk

Simple today:

God is trying to sell you something,

But you don't want to buy.

That is what your suffering is:

Your fantastic haggling,
Your manic screaming over the price! - Hafiz

What a great image! I don't know what you came up with in your meditation, but to me it describes so well the blindness and ingratitude at the heart of most human conflict. We argue over definitions of truth, we make up elaborate doctrines and creeds, while all around us the earth is shining with intense, inspiring beauty. God has offered us colors and music, pleasure, imagination, complex tastes and infinite variety. We've sunbeams to gather, and long hot baths. And it is all right within us. We all have the capacity to appreciate some aspect of this miracle. But we want more. We pout and complain. Humans are never satisfied with our lot. We make everything so much harder.

We are a frightfully insecure species. We know that we are different from other animals, and it makes us uncomfortable. The story of Adam and Eve strikes me as a kind of a dirge for our unity. With our complex brains and consciousness comes loneliness. We have evolved away from the other creatures. We don't fit in. And we have been nostalgic for home ever since.

But we will never find our way back to the garden. We are different. And so we console ourselves by saying by saying that we must be special. After all, if we're going to be outsiders then at least we can be smug about it. It is the right of every minority group to feel superior. So humans have determined to be the center of the Universe, the lords of the earth, and the apotheosis of creation. Every culture has a creation story that explains and affirms their essential consequence. Humans are religious creatures.

Religion isn't a catechism or set of principles. It is an amalgam of our attitudes, experiences and value systems. Naturally, we want to understand these feelings and even repeat them. But when we try to define and describe them we turn them into creeds. The harder we try, the less they mean. They become stale and rigid.

Now, I like an intellectual puzzle as much as the next guy. I loved my Systematic Theology class. I like to know how things - and people - work. It's really satisfying to connect all the dots. So I delight in the world's complexity. My brain is definitely a spiritual organ. But that's really because I'm grateful to have gifts that stimulate and amuse me and help me grow. It's all I know, but it's pretty darn cool. ...Just like your ability to cook, or see dimension, or diagnose a problem. We each have gifts and sensations that bring us joy.

That's religion in a nutshell. Experiencing, and appreciating. Feeling, and connecting. Letting our own sensations of wonder, beauty, and sadness deepen our ties to life. Accepting others by understanding ourselves. It's as simple as that.

We are born amazed. Children are naturally religious because they are surrounded by mystery. Everything is miraculous and wonderful and magical, and anything could happen. There's no such thing as sin. Rev. Wallace W. Robbins retained his memories of this fervor. As the minister of Unity Church Unitarian in Worcester from 1938-44, he recalled, "My religion remains an ultimate mystery to me though I have explored it by backtracking to my fourth year [of life], only a step away from an impenetrable darkness. It is out of that darkness, infrequently and always fleetingly, that there have come flashes of mystic renewal which has kept me in the ministry through the years. I wonder about this religion which came before theology, which depends upon no creed or holy place, apparently upon no tradition, although I cannot be sure my parents did not subtly prepare the way."

As UUs we know that everyone has a piece of the truth. My role as minister isn't to lecture or teach you, but to stimulate you. I'm called to help you find new channels to consider and explore; to startle or irritate you into clarifying your values and embracing your beliefs. And you do the same for each other, out of your own integrity and wisdom.

Rev. Bruce Marshall wrote,

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Unitarian Universalists don't have a creed or a formula for faith. We don't want people telling us what to believe or how to live. It's something everyone has to figure out on our own, by continually testing and assessing and growing into the truth. It never ends. So how can anyone else tell what is right and true for us? Here is just one example of this point. This is from *Stumbling on Happiness* by Dan Gilbert:

Lori and Reba Schappel may be twins, but they are very different people. Reba is a somewhat shy teetotaler who has recorded an award-winning album of country music. Lori, who is outgoing, wisecracking, and rather fond of strawberry daiquiris, works in a hospital and wants someday to marry and have children. They occasionally argue, as sisters do, but most of the time they get on well, complimenting each other, teasing each other, and finishing each other's sentences. In fact, there are just two unusual things about Lori and Reba. The first is that they share a blood supply, part of a skull, and some brain tissue, having been joined at the forehead since birth. One side of Lori's forehead is attached to one side of Reba's and they have spent every moment of their lives locked together, fact-to-face. The second unusual thing about Lori and Reba is that they are happy - not merely resigned or contented, but joyful, playful, and optimistic. Their unusual life presents many challenges, of course, but as they often note, whose doesn't? When asked about the possibility of undergoing surgical separation, Reba speaks for both of them: "Our point of view is no, straight out no. Why would you want to do that? For all the money in China, why? You'd be ruining two lives in the process."

So here's the question: If this were your life rather than theirs, how would you feel? If you said, "joyful, playful, and optimistic," then you are not playing the game and I am going to give you another chance. Try to be honest instead of correct. The honest answer is "Despondent, desperate, and depressed." Indeed, it seems clear that no right-minded person could really be happy under the circumstances, which is why the conventional medical wisdom has it that conjoined twins should be separated at birth, even at the risk of killing one or both. ... In other words, not only does everyone know that conjoined twins will be dramatically less happy than normal people, but everyone also knows that conjoined lives are so utterly worthless that dangerous separation surgeries are an ethical imperative. And yet, standing against the backdrop of our certainty about these matters are the twins themselves. When we ask Lori and Reba how they feel about their situation, they tell us that they wouldn't have it any other way. In an exhaustive search of the medical literature, [a] medical historian found the "desire to remain together to be so widespread among communicating conjoined twins as to be practically universal." Something is terribly wrong here....

There seem to be just two possibilities. Someone - either Lori and Reba, or everyone else in the world - is making a dreadful mistake when they talk about happiness... [We tend to dismiss the twins' claims, saying] "Oh, they're just saying that," or "they don't know what happiness really is" (usually spoken as if we do). [But] What are we all talking about when we make such claims about happiness?

Reba has spina bifida, and because their doctors decided they needed special care, they were declared wards of the state. The sisters spent their entire childhood in an institution for mentally deficient children. It was the only place around. At 24, they petitioned the courts and were granted legal autonomy. So it is not surprising that they should enjoy their independence. What's amazing to me is how philosophical and well-adjusted they are. And I think it is because they have such huge reservoirs of gratitude. They have learned (I

guess) how to notice and appreciate the simple, basic gifts of life. And they know how to negotiate their needs. They have to cooperate with each other, and that requires an amazing degree of self-knowledge.

They are the experts on their own life. It's not a perfect life by most measures, but they are singing it out loud for everyone to hear.

I can't define your happiness, but I know that mine is through knowledge. I don't mean just facts about art or bread making, or old movie stars, though I enjoy a breadth of subjects. But I mean knowing who I am, and some of my purpose; comparing myself with my character at 28, or 16, or 6. I know, innately, that I'm connected to the nuthatch at my feeder, to maples and stars, and it makes me feel good. Some part of me is with them, and always will be.

But a lot of people are at a disadvantage. They've been told to hold out for heaven and save their love for God. Their real life is after death. They can't invest themselves fully in this world, and yet they may somehow fail to achieve the next. Aren't we all raised to compete for gold stars, for top grades and a corner office and the sexiest date? Life isn't fair. It's an endless grind to win. Grand prize: power. But each of us already has all we need.

In *Who Dies*, Stephen Levine describes another perspective. He explains,

In this culture, we look at life as though it were a straight line. The longer the line, the more we imagine we have lived, the wholer we suppose ourselves to be, and the less horrendous we imagine the end point. The death of the young is seen as tragic and shakes the faith of many. But in the American Indian culture one is not seen linearly, but rather as a circle, which becomes complete at about puberty with the rites of passage. From that time on, one is seen as a wholeness that continues to expand outward. But once "the hoop" has formed, any time one dies, one dies in wholeness. As the American Indian sage Crazy Horse commented, "today is a good day to die for all things of my life are present." In the American Indian Wisdom wholeness is not seen as the duration one has lived but rather the fullness with which one enters each complete moment.

We all have stores of spirituality stocked up within us. Feelings of compassion, creativity, and courage. Optimism and strength. We simply need to be present to the moment in all its beauty and pain. The energies of life swirl within us and connect us to all living creatures, to matter and mist and to Mars. We add our own voice to the music of the spheres, part passion, part hot air.

So sing. Sing a song. Make it simple, to last your whole life long. Don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear. Just sing. Sing a song. ["Sing" by Joe Raposo]

CLOSING WORDS: by Andrew Young: "The Last Leaf"

I saw how rows of white raindrops
From bare boughs shone,
And how the storm had stript the leaves
Forgetting none
Save one left high on a top twig
Swinging alone:
Then that too bursting into song
Fled and was gone.