

Miracles and Faith

Today, I will speak to you of miracles and of *experiential* Faith, a Faith that can transform one's life. After all, what good is faith if it doesn't at least do that? My Quaker background and context will inform much of what I will share. I speak today only as myself, not as spokesperson for the Society of Friends. It is my hope to inspire a conversation; a conversation with yourself, with your loved ones, with this faith community and with others in your lives.

But first, I want to explain what I mean by "Faith." When I speak of *my* spiritual "faith" I don't mean my religion, my belief system, conviction, trust or hope. Each of these can exist without Faith. They can also be the product of Faith but they are not Faith. For me, Faith is an inward transformational experience that is uniquely human and is often found in the presence of Grace.

It is my belief that Faith cannot be engendered by religion or its doctrines, creeds, scriptures or human leaders. Those who would instruct you in faith are more likely lead you away from it than toward it. Those who would help you *discover* faith can only point in its direction, especially by making an object example of Faith as it orders their own lives. It is my *conviction* that *living* Faith can only arise as the result of a direct experience of the Divine. (repeat)

Now I understand that some Unitarians struggle with the very *notion* of the Divine as do many Quakers. Theism is being challenged on many fronts and that does not trouble *me* in the least. Theism needs to be challenged, as do all lesser authorities such as doctrines and creeds. Such challenges do not and cannot threaten my Faith. My Faith stands outside of those constructs.

With that in mind, what do I mean by this *experience of the Divine* as the Source of my Faith? For me it begins with the recognition of and the experience of miracles. To begin to give you a sense of what I mean I will share a short poem.

What is not a miracle?
Must I look to the stars or holy books,
Or measure my poor understanding
By the infinite unknown?
Must I witness the healing of the lame or blind,
Or the raising of the dead?
Is the air I breathe not wonder enough,
And is my own clear sight an insufficient gift
To perceive the falling leaf,
Or sunlight captured by the dew?
Should I discount the scent of rain in spring,
Or the music of spoken love,
Or the fullness of the universe,
Just beneath the petal of a rose?

The miracles of which I speak are as common as sunrise and sunset. But, if they are common then why do I call them miracles? Aren't miracles unexplainable and supernatural? Perhaps not. Let's consider for a moment the universe itself, the entire universe. Science estimates 200 to 400 billion suns in our rather ordinary galaxy. It takes 120,000 years for light to travel from one side of our galaxy to the other. Big place. How many galaxies do you suppose there are? We don't know. Estimates go as high as 500 billion.

So here we are, gathered in fellowship. We are each made of star stuff. Every atom in our bodies was born in a star. Where did it begin? Where does it end? In all of this infinite creation we are profoundly insignificant in mass and in duration. On a dust speck circling a dust speck we are but a speck of dust. What miracle? The universe has been expanding for 14 billion years.... we think. It's all part of the reality of time and space and matter. Everyone wants absolute and irrefutable proof of a miracle. Try this: Over those billions of years the universe has arranged its atoms into sentience. Of that we can be 100% certain! We think! We consider. We wonder. We know. We love. We are aware. In other words the universe has become aware of itself.

MIRACLE #1!

"And God saw that it was good." Awareness! Our human awareness tends to make us assume a Master Plan and therefore a Master, God if you will. I struggle with the concept of god and even the word god because of the baggage of religion and by naming the unnamable we diminish it. Thus diminished is it worthy of worship? When the ancient Jews said that their god was unnamable it demonstrated great wisdom. Lao Tzu simply said: *"The Tao that can be named is not the Tao."* That is an *essential* place to begin and to end when considering the Divine and the Faith that arises from it.

Awareness does not of course assure wisdom. As humanity has evolved, the god we have tended to describe looks a lot like us and if the bible stories are to be believed this god has been every bit as nasty as we humans often are. The book of Joshua is a case in point. I do not worship such a god. The Divine Presence that I seek in the stillness of my worship is not that anthropomorphic, spiteful little deity that rules over the Abrahamic religions.

Many Christians claim that their scriptures are *the* absolute, final and inerrant word of God. For me, scriptural literalism is not just counter intuitive and anti-intellectual. It is also dangerous, guarantees abuse and engenders evil. **Scriptural literalism obstructs the way to a living, growing and experiential faith.** When I read scripture, whether it is Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Taoist, I strive to discern the spirit and read it in the spirit in which it was originally conceived. These are the thoughts of those who have come before but they are not sacred by any measure. **To treat them as sacred is idolatry.** Only the Source is sacred.

The ancient symbols and tales found in scripture are useful only to the extent that they may inform our understanding of that which came before and may also point us in the direction of the original enlightenment that inspired the words. Again from Taoism, *"Do not mistake the pointing finger for the moon."*

Many religious bodies claim to be the only right way to God and salvation. They claim exclusivity and by becoming exclusive they exclude the Divine. I am one who believes that far too often religion is little more than the petrified remains of a long forgotten enlightenment now lost in mostly well meaning ritual, creed, hierarchy and superstitious nonsense.

The 17th Century poet Basho once said, *"Seek not to follow in the footsteps of men of old; seek what they sought."* Jesus of Nazareth understood this. **His** was a ministry of revival and in the precious little we can ascertain of that ministry, it seems clear that he was attempting to share his *experiences* of the Divine in a way that could be understood and felt by those around him.

The essence of those profound and simple teachings is a constant inspiration to me and affirms and encourages my own experience. I believe that the Truth and Source of his Faith and of mine is the same Source and the same Truth, and available to all who ask. His ministry as I read it was never about him. Indeed, if the Divine Source "spoke" to him then it can also "speak" to us and he said so. Furthermore, The Divine Source must, by nature, be unchangeable, eternal and outside of space, time and matter. It can be perceived within our awareness but not quantified.

Jesus' ministry was predominantly about the experience of Divine Love that could alter one's life. Sadly, in a few short years after his enlightened ministry, the Faith of Rabbi Jesus became a religion *about* Jesus Christ and the results are an astounding repudiation of nearly all that he taught, lived and died for.

Even more unfortunate, by the 4th Century AD the concept of "original sin" or birthright depravity had been articulated by Augustine and is today a foundational belief of most Christian sects. "Original sin" is also a profound repudiation of Jesus' gospel of Love and the diametric opposite of the essential Truth that each of us is conceived with that of the Divine within us. That Divine Seed is ever present, even in the worst of us, and our highest human calling is to nurture that seed, within ourselves and within others.

What sort of a cruel god would want us to teach our children that they are born evil and are destined for eternal suffering in hell fire unless they follow some church's arcane dictates? How does one worship a "god of infinite love" that is also reputed to have created such a demented construct?

Nowhere in scripture did the Rabbi Jesus claim to be a god. It is written that he said, "*Why do you call me good? Only my Father in Heaven is good.*" And also that he said, "*Call me Friend.*" His message was simple and accessible to people of all stations. I summarize it in a single word: Love. He counseled Love. He ministered to everyone, be they Roman, Jew, Samaritan, rich, poor, man or woman, old, young, educated, ignorant, good or not so good. He counseled compassion and forgiveness. He held up a standard for living that is as vital and right today as the moment he spoke it. He was the ultimate Universalist.

You see, Divine Truth is unchangeable. It belongs to no one and no religion. Jesus understood that. He spoke in the language and forms of his Jewish tradition but, when he spoke his words conveyed a far greater authority than those of just a Rabbi. His presence communicated authority not because he was a "Lord" or "God" but because his *experience of faith* was manifested in his manner and bearing and thus his charismatic ministry led others to their own experience of Divine Faith. They felt God present within him and so within themselves. By this *experience* they were transformed and "healed." He was the "pointing finger" and no more holy than you. Seek what he sought. In Truth, each of you are as loved as anyone who has ever lived.

He promised that the "Kingdom of God" was at hand. That has usually been interpreted to mean that it was about to happen, and some scholars point to that as proof that he was wrong. It seems evident to me that he actually meant that the Kingdom of God being at hand meant right here and right now. If it exists it cannot be otherwise.

Those who premise their religious doctrine on the promise of heaven or the threat of Hell *after* death have missed *that* point entirely and do a grave disservice to the immediate and eternal opportunity to experience the living Divine now, to live now in harmony with transcendent and immanent Love.

On the darker side, I am acutely aware that it is sometimes difficult to feel Divine Love as we also experience the daily reality of living hell; mass killings, poverty, starvation, disease, suffering and war but the sentient evolutionary arc is ever bending toward Love. It is our task to live our lives disciplined and ordered by the imperatives of that Love. That is plainly and absolutely the evolving path of Creation, what those who have come before might call, "the will of God."

The universe has become aware of itself and, as the arc of human evolution bends ever toward Love I, for want of a better term, name the Source of this Love, "Divine." And, there I discover my Faith. Because the Divine is present within me I am able to look over this room and see and feel the Divine present within each of you and to feel it present among us. What greater Truth could there be at the center of a community of faith?

Please enter with me into a period of silence and in the stillness simply be aware of the Love that unites the Universe as you love one another and all of creation. After a few moments in this aware and loving silence, I will close with a final thought. Please return to stillness with me now.

May peace be with each of us. Thank you.

Don Badgley