

Experiential Living Faith

Message to the Unitarian - Universalist Community March 16, 2014

When I was with you last I shared some thoughts on faith and miracles from my personal and Quaker perspective. I pointed out the infinite manifestations of miracles we all witness in every moment and proposed that perhaps the greatest miracle of all is our own awareness; an awareness that arises and exists as an element of the universe itself. Awareness is a non-physical aspect of the universe and outside of time and space. Indeed, we are living and absolute proof that our universe has become aware of itself.

Regardless of one's belief or non-belief in a God, Deity or Divine Presence we can state with certainty that our conscious contemplation of *anything* is a reality that seems both profoundly unlikely and miraculous on its face, especially considering the fiery origins of the physical universe. Of course one could also say that self-conscious life was 100% certain to arise simply because it did, because it is. Then, if you consider what we think we know about the universe, its origins and infinite magnitude, you begin to gain perspective on our little blue dust speck called earth. Life forms on this insignificant yet living sphere have evolved enhancements to their own senses that allow them (us humans) to perceive the farthest reaches of that universe, billions of years into the past. A few grandparents back we didn't even know what the stars were.

Science and scientists are brilliant manifestations of humanity's compelling need to understand and explain. Unlike religionists, scientists require proof and mathematical justification for their speculations. In this very moment there is a physicist laboring to better understand the event horizon of black holes. Another scientist might be considering the mechanism that allows a monarch butterfly to fly thousands of miles and land in the same tree as its ancestors. Meanwhile, religionists are content to say, "because God said so, that's why."

Scientists dismiss these notions even as they have yet to explain gravity or why we yawn. *Some* religionists condemn scientists as outside of God's holy realm and beyond the church's "salvation." The scientists don't seem to care.

This conflict is unfortunate, non-productive and serves neither group. I prefer to accept both scientific observation and experiential faith as two precious aspects of human perception. I am not a scientist but, I am one who orders his life by the leadings of faith and also accepts science as a miraculous expression of the human mind. Science is a human enterprise that does not contradict my faith, it constantly confirms it.

For me, those who would claim absolute certainty of their interpretation of God's purpose while proclaiming an absolute and exclusive canon or doctrine are as far from grace as the scientist who seems unable to perceive love as anything more than a chemical reaction within the human brain.

The priest threatens humanity with damnation while the skeptical scientist accepts the already accomplished damnation found in loneliness; a loneliness that arises in blindness to the scientifically unprovable yet experiential Divine Spirit within all of life.

We humans have been trying to define and confine God since we became human. It is an essential aspect of our humanity - even for atheists. Most of that is driven by self-conscious awareness of impending non-existence. Death! We are all going to die! Thus expressions of a theistic god are found across human history and in every culture. Belief in the possibility of eternal life is at the foundation of every major religion and the corresponding belief in a separate, caring and all-powerful supreme being brings comfort to billions. Today I encourage you to begin to seek and consider the actual *Source* of the god experience, the *Experience*, and to clear away the ancient layers of doctrine and religion that often obscure that Divine Light and Source. Such doctrines are almost always well meaning but, over time, doctrine and scripture can become the central focus to the detriment of the original causative event, the *experience* of the Divine. Even if you have already rejected rigid religious doctrine, the very existence of that doctrine may still be having an obstructive effect on the experience of the Divine Source.

So, let's consider faith. *Living* Faith arises in an Experience. This experience is most likely to occur in an inward stillness. In such stillness a seeker may touch G*d and so be touched by G*d. And no, you don't have to name it God. The unnamable is unnamable. Yet occasionally, in a timeless instant of communion we may each *experience* infinite Love and the Oneness of the Divine All. I have.

I suspect that many of you have as well, even if you did not identify it as such.

In such timeless moments we perceive the Divine Realm as immediate, ever present and eternal. We discover that **the Spirit within each of us is as infinite as its Source and this changes us.** The 1st Century wisdom teacher Jesus pointed to this Truth by explaining that *“the Kingdom of God is at hand.”* Even a glimpse of this ultimate Truth is transformative and causes us to seek it again and again. This *experience* is both the cause and the essence of my faith. It came to me unbidden and, at first I didn't recognize it. In a sense it blinded me. Jesus was right, it really is right there, right here, all the time and for everyone.

Within this experience compassion and forgiveness are raised up. Closed doctrine, creed and hierarchy are reduced or discarded. Religion, theology and scripture are realized as no more than aids for the journey and not the destination. Hatred and violence are felt *viscerally* as poison while Love and acts of love resonate with the very fabric of the universe. The experience of Oneness and Divine Love leads us into greater simplicity; there to order our lives with greater integrity. The oneness of Divine Love allows us to recognize and experience our equality as beings. This Love calls us into community and the Loving Community calls the whole world into Peace. In such a world justice and liberty are the inevitable fruit of a renewed and compassionate understanding.

The billions who have passed through life in human form have each possessed the secret knowledge of their Source, usually well hidden in the detritus of living and further obscured by religion and the fear of death. There, within each of us, the Divine Seed waits in perfect peace for our conscious awareness to focus the Light of Love upon it, nurturing its growth. When this seed grows the world improves. This is my faith.

One of my greatest concerns is that in the 21st Century as in past centuries, the loudest voices, sometimes the only voices, are those who proclaim doctrines of separation and rejection by exclusivity; our truth or go to Hell.

This is not new and certainly not limited to Christian doctrine, but these voices have grown increasing strident in recent years. When *any* faith community claims absolute authority within their doctrine and a single narrow and limited path to G*d, they are not just misguided but often doing harm. A claim of absolute authority and certainty may give followers a sense of comfort and even peace but there is a price for that.

Unfortunately, such doctrinal certainty may also give followers a sense of judgmental superiority that marginalizes, excludes or even demonizes those on different life or faith journeys. Self-appointed Fundamentalists have invaded the political sphere in efforts to impose a theocracy that attacks or blatantly discriminates against those whose beliefs or behaviors do not comply with their "holy" doctrines. **And there, germinating within every absolutist and exclusivist religion grow the seeds of war, maturing in the in the fertile ground of common human nature.**

We all need to say this aloud – lovingly -courageously - whenever possible and to whomever will listen. We must say it. Silence is compliance.

It is easy to be discouraged but then, as I perceive what Quaker founder George Fox named the Ocean of Light, flowing over the ocean of darkness I experience my measure of peace. This Divine Light is accessible to everyone without or even despite religion.

Imagine a garden bathed in Light, without doctrinal gates or theology guards where Divine Love nurtures all that grows there. This is a place where in a timeless and transcendent state we recognize ourselves and the whole human family, indeed all of life, to be living manifestations of the infinite “ground of being”, miracles each, Children of the Light. In this elevated condition we discover our individual consciousness, our physical life and awareness to be an essential aspect of the infinite mind of G*d. There we are able to *experience* G*d *not* as separate from us and thus diminished but now as the infinite “All” that speaks to us, through us and in manifestations across creation. This is my faith.

We began today with the lighting of the chalice. There seem to be several interpretations for this symbol and the prayers offered at its lighting are instructive. They seem to focus on community and on love. For example from Judith M. Quarles: *“As we light our chalice today, let us remember that we are part of a great community of faith. May this dancing flame inspire us to fill our lives with the Unitarian Universalist ideals of love, justice and truth.”*

I appreciate the symbol of the chalice, particularly as considered from the perspective of my theme today, Experiential Faith. A chalice holds something precious. We don't go to the diner and ask for a chalice of coffee. I've learned that one interpretation is that the flame within the chalice symbolizes the Spirit of the congregation, its beliefs and its work in the world. This is beautiful and centers you as a people of faith. This is good.

It seems to me that the chalice could also symbolize humanity itself - humanity as the vessel that contains the Light of the *Aware Divine Spirit*. We are, each of us, a Divine Chalice that holds within us the Light of the Infinite. At the moment we accept that Truth, the acceptance of the worth and dignity of every person becomes inevitable. Let us walk joyfully over the earth speaking to that of the Divine in everyone we encounter. That is the path to peace.

I close today with a verse from William Wordsworth:

*And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

May we close with a moment of silence.