



Trees Full of Angels or Infinity in Your Hand

Rev. Roger Jones, UU Society of Sacramento
Sunday, November 17, 2013

Shared Offering for [Sacramento Loaves & Fishes](#)

Dance with Music: Sarah Bush Dance Project with “Sing When the Spirit Says Sing” by Sweet Honey in the Rock and “The Last Bird” by Zoe Keating.

Hymns: #126 “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” #21 “For the Beauty of the Earth,” #163, “For the Earth Forever Turning.”

Reading (followed by “The Last Bird”) with Dance: William Blake:

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour...

Sermon

“A spiritual awakening is taking place in the world today.” So writes Macrina Wiederkehr, a Catholic sister who lives in a Benedictine monastery in Arkansas. She says: “An authentic yearning to touch the depths of who we are is urging people to seek out ways to rekindle the soul.” In her book about “seeing the holy in the ordinary,” she finds this a “promising sign” for the future. But as a spiritual teacher, she does offer a warning.

She explains: “I am concerned about the many people today who are lured to extraordinary spiritual phenomena that are manifested, ... in sensational ways. Stories abound about visions and trances, weeping statues, rosaries turning gold. Celestial beings are emerging everywhere, and angels are in danger of becoming trendy.” In other words, across the wide landscape of spirituality, she sees a few “cautionary flags.” These flags look like angels. Too many angels for *her*, and she’s a nun! Too many supernatural events.

Of course, questionable accounts of unnatural occurrences have been splashed on the

cover of tabloid newspapers in the supermarket for decades. Now the Internet provides a nonstop supply of sensational spirituality. This may not be just a harmless and amusing distraction. It can be spiritually dangerous. This is because, when we look outside our own lives for spiritual validation, we may neglect our own gifts. We may diminish the ability to find meaning in our own lives and comfort in our everyday surroundings. When we seek the sensational, out there, we cannot explore the depth of our own souls, *in here*.

The nun seems to say: You want miracles? Go down to the river or up to the mountains. Visit a local park, or a nature preserve, and look up at the trees. You want angels? A tree is “full of angels,” Sister Macrina says. She’s talking about leaves, flowers, and fruit, about the miracle of growth and the web of nature. There is holiness in the here and now. Whether we identify as religious or not, too many of us today are suffering from a lack of noticing the grace of the world at hand.

Yet she is not blaming us, only diagnosing a problem for us. She says: “The fast pace of our lives makes it difficult for us to find grace in the present moment, and when the simple gifts at our

fingertips cease to nourish us, we have a tendency to crave the sensational.”

Yes. It’s hard to find grace in the moment if we’re struggling “in the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life,” as Henry David Thoreau pictured our situation, and he was writing back in 1854. We live with a stressful pace of life, and the distractions of technology, media, and a consumer culture that doesn’t know the meaning of *enough*. We feel the tensions of economic uncertainty, the growing inequality of wealth, the pressing demands on our time. We see suffering around the world, and in our own towns and in our circles of care and kin.

So much can weigh on the spirit. We need spiritual comfort and nourishment. I know I need it, and I think some of you feel the same way.

Sister Macrina’s message reminds me of something from our own religious tradition. The Unitarian Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson made a similar pronouncement. In 1838, a few years after he left parish ministry, he spoke to the graduating class at the divinity school at Harvard, nearly all of them freshly minted Unitarian ministers.

In Boston in 1838, Unitarianism was barely two decades old. Many Unitarian ministers still believed that Jesus of Nazareth had conducted supernatural miracles. Even some Harvard professors still taught the miracle stories as literally true events. To the Boston Unitarians, even though Jesus was not God, the fact that Jesus conducted miracles was evidence of God’s favor. The miracles proved that the *moral teachings* of Jesus were true. This name for this doctrine is supernatural rationalism.

Emerson would not have it. According to Emerson, “the word Miracle,” as most churches use the word, “gives a false impression.” By their worn-out literalism and limited imaginations, he said, they’ve turned the word *miracle* into a “monster.”

A true miracle is the life of a human being, of *every* human being. A true miracle is visible through nature. A miracle, he said, must be on par “with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”

Whatever faith you preach or practice, Emerson said, “[that] faith should blend with the light of rising [suns] and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers.”

You want miracles? Go outside on a clear night and look up! Emerson said: “Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. [Any person] under them seems a young child.”

The Reverend Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar is a Unitarian Universalist from New Hampshire. She says that children are inherently spiritual beings. Naturally open, children are predisposed to experience the world as a place of mystery and wonder. They are “natural poets and natural mystics,” she writes. They can become totally absorbed in the progress of a caterpillar or the movement of the clouds, losing all sense of themselves.” (Nieuwejaar, 65)

Nieuwejaar recounts a story about Howard Ikemoto, who is an artist. He said: “When my daughter was seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college, that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared back at me, incredulous, and said, ‘*You mean they forget?*’” (Nieuwejaar, 62, citing Gregg Levoy)

As an adult, Henry David Thoreau kept and cultivated his childlike wonder. As another of our Transcendentalist spiritual writers, Thoreau devoted his time to doing just enough ordinary work to sustain his life, and used the rest of his time to reflect on his life. Thoreau said: “I see, smell, taste, hear, [and] feel that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves.”

The good news from our Unitarian Transcendentalists is this: everyone has the right to a sense of connection to life, to all the forms of life around us, to the Mystery of life. We may not wish for mystical visions, but in any case the sense of connection and wonder is not the privilege of the few. The wonder of life should be available to all, here and now. It should be open to us if we but open our hearts!

Yet some people may still ask—what’s all the spirituality stuff about? Some of us may feel left out, uncertain, non-mystical, un-*poetic*, even spiritually inadequate. Sometimes I can be one of those people. As today approached, I worried what to say in my sermon about seeing the holy in the ordinary. But then I decided to take some time, a few moments every day to slow down and watch. Slow down, take some time.

As I sit in the morning light at the kitchen window of my apartment, I decide to trust that miracles will reveal themselves to me, or at least I will be able to say I tried to be open to them. Just outside the window between the sidewalk and the street is a big tree with narrow tapered leaves. This week, they look so yellow and full on the tree, even though the tree has shed many already. A few of its leaves still have a trace of green in them, but mostly it's a big ball of yellow fire coming out of long, rough angled brown limbs. Wow--I have a kitchen window with a big bright yellow tree just outside! How did I forget that? Even though I've sat at that window more than at any other window in my apartment, for five years, it feels as if I haven't noticed it before. Noticing. I want to remember to notice.

This is what I take from the notable spiritual teachers of our heritage and those less famous ones who on Sunday mornings are seated in the chairs of this sanctuary, this Unitarian Universalist congregation. If we are open to noticing the feel of every day and every night we're given, maybe we can sense the power and energy around us. If we decide that we wish to take some time to slow down, sometimes, we might be surprised.

Thoreau said: "We are surrounded by a rich and fertile mystery. May we not probe it, pry into it, ... a little?" (Journal 1851)

Thoreau did his daily chores, but he did not let practical concerns get in the way of his open study of life. He said: "The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all/ to hear this locust/ sing." How *wise* he was! And how lucky, that he did not have to worry about making a house payment. And how convenient that he did not have children to shuttle to school or medical appointments or athletic practice. How lucky that he did not have to prepare a sermon to deliver on Sunday! His simple and single life made it easier.

Yet he was not writing to boast about his spiritual depth, he was writing with care and compassion for our shared spiritual hunger. He was suggesting: Just say that you wish to notice life's miracles. Just be open. You deserve it. You deserve to be nourished by the ordinary miracle of life.

This past Thursday morning I rose early, shaved and brushed my teeth, and walked to the nearby YMCA to exercise. It still was mostly dark outside, but sunrise had begun. I walked to the

corner and turned east. The dawn sky was cast with a bold purple-pink light. A long stretch of wide, flat ruffled clouds glowed with that beautiful color. I gasped: "Oh my God." I usually don't speak out loud when I'm walking alone, but I did. As I turned another corner, heading south, I kept my eyes on that view, knowing that as the sun and clouds moved the view would not last much longer than my walk to the Y, where in any case I would be indoors.

I must confess that right after I gasped at the texture and color of the dawn, I felt a sense of relief. I thought: "Sermon illustration! I found an ordinary miracle with days to spare before Sunday. Whew." Perhaps I was not as deficient in the spirituality department as I had feared.

Perhaps it made a difference that I had told myself that I wanted to notice. I had made the intention, had actually said that I wish to be open to seeing ordinary miracles.

There are many ways to experience the holy in the ordinary. Whatever that might be for you.... Merely take time--with others or by yourself--for a practice, an activity, or a pastime that has no obvious practical purpose. Just say to yourself that you wish to be more open to the miracle of ordinary life.

Thoreau asked: "What kind of gift is life unless we have spirits to enjoy it and taste its true flavor?" [8/10]

There are many ways to make our spirits ready to enjoy the gift of life. Let us remember that we deserve this enjoyment. You deserve it, and I do, and so does everyone alive on this earth. May we strive to shape a world more just and fair, in which the whole human family can taste the true sweet flavor of life.

May we live with openness to the miracles of the ordinary day. And, being open to them, let us enjoy them, and give thanks. So may it be.

Blessed be, amen and Namaste.

Works Cited

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Divinity School Address," July 15, 1838. See <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>
- Nieuwejaar, Jeanne Harrison. *Fluent in Faith*. Boston: Skinner House, 2012.
- Thoreau, H. D. *A Week on the Concord & Merrimack River* and *Walden*.
- Wiederkehr, Macrina. *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009, p. ix.