

# “A Power Beyond Ourselves”

a reflection

by Rev. Bill Gupton

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church

Cincinnati, Ohio

Let me begin my reflection today by acknowledging what a *blessing* it is, for me, to be part of a UU church where we can sing, on Sunday morning, a hymn, such as the one we just sang. Some Unitarian Universalist churches are what I call “*God-free zones*” – congregations which espouse religious freedom, but where at times it seems people are more interested in being free from religion. But the deep Universalist roots we celebrate here at Heritage provide us, I believe, with both a stronger, shared spiritual foundation upon which to draw, and a more all-embracing sense of religious expression.

Nonetheless, I know, because there are folks who have spoken with me about it over the years, that for some people just saying, or singing, the word “God” is uncomfortable. I want to lift up that truth as well, and honor it – and say that I, too, sometimes feel that centuries of misuse and abuse have stripped the word “God” of any meaning it may have once had.

So, too, other traditional religious words, like “prayer,” or “miracle.” Yet I am asking you this morning to consider the proposition that each of us lives, and breathes, and has our being, in the very *midst* of miracles. Is it anything short of a miracle that, from a seed, springs a flower – from an acorn, grows a tree – from a sperm and an egg – you, and me?

These and other common miracles suffuse every moment of our existence. Consider the way our breath draws oxygen into our lungs, oxygen which crosses a perfect barrier into our bloodstream; consider the way our breath releases carbon dioxide, which becomes part of a similar chemical exchange in the plants on which we depend, for life.

Yes, at this very moment, we are literally swimming, like fish in water, within something truly, and utterly, *miraculous* – something that is much bigger, much more powerful, than ourselves – something on which we are utterly dependent.

And I believe, in the words of this morning’s call to worship, that “We have *religion* [only] when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, or self-derived... [That] we have religion, [only] when we [can] entrust ourselves to [a] Life that is larger than ours.”

Friends, these are not even easy words to say – but how much more difficult they are, *to live*. Even if, in our human insecurity, we are somehow able to take that initial step of admitting – living, if uneasily, with the fact that we are *not* self-sufficient – there remains the kicker: to be open to experiencing the full depth and breadth of life, to fully realize our potential as spiritual and religious creatures – we must also come to a place of trust – to *entrust* ourselves, to that what is beyond ourself.”

Let’s pause a moment to break down this two-part process of spiritual awakening – which is, after all, the work of a lifetime (or of more than one lifetime, if you are so inclined). Step one: acknowledging, and learning to live comfortably with the fact that we are *dependent* creatures – dependent on a power far greater than ourselves. Step two: *trusting* that power, giving ourselves over to it, and – ultimately, as we draw our final breath – giving ourselves *back* to it.

In a nutshell, this is the universal spiritual journey, common to seekers of every faith, in every time. Only through surrender to Allah, say the Muslims, shall we find peace. Not my will, but thine, say the Christians. By letting go of our attachments, say the Buddhists, we can achieve nirvana. Those in 12-Step programs begin by admitting their powerlessness, then trusting in a higher power – “letting go, and letting God.”

Each of these paths – drawn from the East, and the West – drawn from ancient times, and from modern times – offer remarkably similar religious instruction. Basically, it can be summed up in two words: admit, then submit.

But to admit our contingent, dependent nature; to submit to a power beyond ourself – these actions pose a particular challenge for Unitarian Universalists. We pride ourselves on our individualism, our independence. It is no coincidence that Emerson, the author “Self-Reliance,” is among our most celebrated spiritual ancestors. It is no coincidence that many of us have difficulty with trust, with believing in things we cannot scrutinize and measure, with letting forces beyond our control, act upon us.

Yet that is the nature of life itself. We are – to an extent far greater than any of us are comfortable admitting – interdependent, rather than independent. We are – and each of us remains painfully aware of this fact, at some subconscious level – like the people at Fort Hood (to whom our hearts go out in solidarity this morning), just one unthinkable moment away from having, in Chardin’s words, our “narrow standards of measurement” shattered.

Like you, of course, I would prefer to think of only the beautiful and the benevolent side of the Spirit of Life – those chirping birds and blooming flowers, orange sunsets and green mountains. Like, again, Emerson, I would rather look at the “roses under my window.” But as Chardin reminds us, the full “dimension of God” includes, necessarily, a darker side. The Hindus had it right, when they envisioned the ultimate force in the universe as both and equally creator and destroyer. The same force that makes the delicate petals of a rose unfold, brings a tsunami crashing over an island village.

Let me share with you a dream I had, this week, as I was preparing for today’s service. As I do, perhaps it would help – if you are comfortable doing so – if you closed your eyes...

Picture yourself driving a car, heading up a long, steep gravel road. Suddenly, up ahead – up above you – you see an avalanche, tumbling down the mountainside toward you – as you head toward it. Dust and smoke billow across the road – and on both sides of the road, as far into the horizon as you can see. Rocks and boulders create a roaring sound – and this entire tidal wave of ... debris ... is rumbling down on top of you.

In a panic, you shift the car’s gears, execute a quick three-point turn – and begin racing down the mountain, hoping against hope that you can outrun the oncoming avalanche.

Then, as it grows ever closer to you, you see a building up ahead – a gleaming, glass and metal structure maybe five stories tall. You pull into the parking lot, in a panic, and rush inside. You can see, out the window, that the cloud of rocks and dust and dirt is about to engulf the building itself – but the building’s the only place of shelter. Strangely, those inside the building have not yet noticed the impending doom – but when you point, wordlessly, out the window at the avalanche, they, too, begin scrambling for cover. Some cram into a closet – but you, in a moment of lucid thought, decide instead to run up the stairs to the top floor, in hopes that the height of the building will keep you from being buried alive.

You reach the top floor – a restaurant where, again, the patrons do not yet seem to have noticed the avalanche – and you dive under one of the tables, curling up into a fetal position, and waiting. You can hear the roar of the tumbling debris – and, looking out the window – you see the dirt and rocks slowly blocking out the sunlight as they move up the outside of the glass walls, like sands in an hourglass...

And that is where the dream ends. I'll give you a moment to return, to this safe and comfortable sanctuary – just as I needed a moment, to realize I was in my own safe, and comfortable bed, when I awoke from this particular dream, sometime in the wee hours of Friday morning. So take a moment, to return, and to integrate your thoughts and feelings...

As some of you know, I'm a big fan of dreams. I believe dreams are one of the very best ways we have, of learning about ourselves. Jung, and others, have pointed out just what a *spiritual tool* dreams can be, as we seek to ask the big religious questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Having taken a course, in seminary, on the spirituality of dreams – having been a long-time keeper of dream journals – I could tell you now that, upon waking, I was aware of the symbolism of the *windows*, and the fact that in my dream, I was always inside some protected area, *looking out* at the world, looking *out* a window – looking, with a mixture of fascination and fear – looking at, but somehow separated from, a power that was greater than myself.

I could, as well, focus on details like the fetal position in which I eventually chose to await my fate; or the strange sense that others were, at least initially, unaware of the danger were in; or the clearly *meaningful* sands-of-time, hourglass image.

I could do all that – but instead, what strikes me most of all about my dream is the fact that I was *running away* from this power greater than myself – despite the obvious futility of such an effort. The thing is, this not the first time I have had such a dream – one in which I am about to be *overwhelmed* by some force more powerful than I am – a force that I am desperately trying to avoid – and then, just as I am about to be consumed – I wake up.

It's as if I've been watching a heart-pounding action movie, for an hour and a half – only to have someone pull the plug, right in the middle of the climactic chase scene. *I never get to see the end of the movie.* But as my graduate-school professor used to tell us, you cannot remake your dreams. They are, what they are.

So this particular, recurring theme, somehow, is part of who I am: It seems that somewhere inside me, is a white-knuckled man – probably more accurately, a frightened little boy – who is terrified of facing a power beyond himself. But ironically, another part of me is a man who knows, both logically (and, in fact, theologically), that it is only by facing that power – by turning and looking it right in the eye – can I ever truly learn what it means, to be human. As Forrest Church says, religion is the human response to living a life which we know must ultimately end. Admit, then submit. How much easier our lives would be – and how much sweeter – if we could let go, just a little bit more – let go, and let God.

I am reminded of one of my favorite poems, one that I have shared with you before, by Denise Levertov – titled “The Avowal.” She writes,

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky,  
and water bears them –  
as hawks rest upon air,  
and air sustains them –  
so I would learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,  
knowing [that] no *effort* earns  
that all-surrounding Grace.

*That* is what I long to do! To attain freefall. To lie, completely still, on my back, in the water – and be held up, by the water. To float effortlessly, like a hawk, on the warm air. To trust – to fully entrust myself, to that power which is greater than myself.

Here’s how the Unitarian Universalist essayist Phillip Simmons put it, in his beautiful book “Learning to Fall”:

“At its deepest level, life is not a problem, *but a mystery*. The distinction ... is fundamental: Problems are to be solved; true mysteries are not... At one time or another, each of us confronts an experience so powerful, [so] bewildering, [so] joyous or terrifying, that all our efforts to see it as a ‘problem,’ are futile. Each of us is brought to the cliff’s edge. At such moments, we can either back away ... or leap forward into the Mystery.”

“And what does Mystery ask of us?” he continues. “Only that we *be in its presence*, that we fully, consciously, hand ourselves over. That is all – and that is everything. We can participate in mystery, only by letting go.”

May *we* learn to participate, in the mystery. May we experience the peace, which passes all understanding – the peace which comes with letting go – the peace that comes only as we *entrust* ourselves ... to a power, beyond ourselves.

May it be so. Blessed be. And amen.