

2007-03-18 Miracles & Visions

We are here

to join together deliberately

to shape a community of witness and care

that can offer a healing vision to the world,

and provide a place where wonder and honesty

also make us more whole. And so we say

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Sequence

I wonder.

Do the buds feel as impatient as I do when winter lingers on?

I wonder.

Does the crocus have growing pains

like I had when I was young?

I wonder.

Is the first sight of the unfolding yellow snapdragon in Columbus Ohio any less exciting than the arrival of the first autumn gold on the trees in Melbourne, Australia?

I wonder.

Can my delight in warming spring have something to do with my hope for a real thaw of icy injustice here on the earth?

I wonder.

When a bud opens into a blossom does something in me begin to blossom too?

I wonder.

Are the dreams of snuggling winter really so different from the dreams of skipping spring?

I wonder.

Can questions like these really fly
without the wings offered by silence?

Silence

I wonder. Is there anything more miraculous,
more wonderful, than love?

I wonder. Who are the loving men and women and children who never let
me go,

those whose love has delivered me onto the
threshold of this hour?

How can I begin to thank them for what they have done without first
naming them explicitly?

I begin with these names...silently or spoken.

Naming

I wonder.

If the world spun around the sun, and the sun
traveled through the galaxy of stars for almost
five billion years before the invention of music...however did it make it
through?

Reading

The First Reading *comes from an anthology of writings by Unitarian
Universalists called*

*Stand By This Faith. This particular piece comes from my brilliant
colleague Naomi King.*

It is work. It is work for our teens and children and for our elders and for
ourselves because living faithful lives requires courage and stamina. It
requires courage because we are bucking conventional wisdom by just
being here. The more we give ourselves to hope and act on that, the more
we are working against the conventional wisdom.

Conventional wisdom says:

Only a few people are worth caring about, so get everything for yourself
that you can.

If you are not wealthy, it's your fault.

If you are not happy, it's your fault.
And you better hope to get into heaven one day.

You are *here* though. *Here*, where we say:

Everyone is worth caring about, even if we have to struggle to see that.
We can have enough money and time and give to others too.
There is such a thing as social inequity, and we're working to change that.
Happiness requires a great many things, and it begins here in human connection and caring.
And whether there is a heaven or not, we need to get to work here and now.

What we do here extends beyond these doors.
We're doing church even when we're not at church. We're doing church the other six days of the week. We are constantly making the choice to stand with this faith and make hope real. When we open this circle, we are standing with this faith.

The Second Reading comes from one of the votive tablets found at Epidauros in Greece,
a healing center famous for its dream therapy.
These tablets were commissioned around the year 400, but contain recorded stories from
hundreds of years earlier, such as the following:

Once there was fellow who could only move one finger in his hand. So he came to Epidauros as a seeker. When he saw all of the votive tablets in the sanctuary, he did not believe any of the stories they told about miraculous healing, and he ridiculed them. But still, he did what all the others did: fell asleep in the sanctuary and had a vision. In his vision, he was playing dice in the cellar of the temple, and just as he was about to throw, the god

Asklepios appeared to him, and jumped on his hand, and stretched out his fingers. When the god stepped off his hand, the fellow was able to wiggle all of his fingers easily. The god asked him if he still had no confidence in the healing stories on the tablets. The fellow said “No, I don’t.” “Well then,” said the god, “from now on your name will be Mr. Skeptic!” (Gk: Apistos) But when the man woke up in the morning, he emerged from the temple, completely healed.

Sermon

For me there is no question that human beings are... vulnerable. They demonstrate remarkable fragility, and can be broken pretty bad. I’m not talking about slipping on the ice and breaking a bone, although that’s certainly part of it. I’m talking about broken spirits, too, and broken-heartedness. I am talking about folks whose path through life is eroded by broken promises, or, whose ordinary road toward healing and health and wholeness ends up in bureaucratic quicksand because of a broken health care system. Or a broken safety net. Or even a broken down will, a deeply fractured hope.

And because this is true, since time immemorial, people all around the world have sought healing from the brokenness. They have sought health. Wholeness.

Sometimes they go to physicians. Sometimes to therapists. Sometimes to the shoulders of reliable friends. Sometimes to religious or spiritual or various political circles.

Of course, there can be brokenness within these circles, within these systems too. For example, over and over again, the tent and television preachers have been shown to be hucksters and charlatans. Skeptics like the Amazing Randi, (who, as a professional magician, *knows* slight of hand when he sees it) were able to show that evangelists like Peter Popoff were using secret two-way radios to effect “supernatural” knowledge. Yet only a few years after being exposed as a fraud, Popoff is on TV again, and

in hotel ballrooms, claiming to work miracles by the hundred, and making broken people whole. But hardly anyone knows the Amazing Randi.

Of course, it's easy to fall into the trap that just because there are hucksters and creeps dispensing false healings that there are no healings anywhere outside the standard medical establishments. This is simply not true. Healing goes on all the time. In hospitals and outside of them. Sometimes involving medical skills. Sometimes not. There are now and have always been spontaneous healings that no one understands. Medical libraries are filled with documentations of such events. The religious tend to suggest God or a spirit has something to do with these healings, but I assure you, they have happened to atheists too. My grandfather, a pretty devout atheist, was told by the doctors after they had operated on him that it was unlikely he would live till morning. The evidence was all against him. But he went on to live another 30 years, which surprised the doctor, who had said the next morning "It's a miracle that this man is still alive."

And even like places at Lourdes, or the Brazilian healing center Joao de Deus based on native spiritist religion, healings do occur. Brokenness is repaired. Not supported by theologies that I share. But nonetheless, wonderful things sometimes happen at the borderline between brokenness and health, and I cannot deny this is true just because my theology is different. No theology is the same as universal reality in my book.

The common word for unexpected healings is *miracle*. Like when the doctor said of my grandfather "It's a miracle he's still alive." What he was saying was that it was *a wonder* that he was alive. What he was saying was that something was swaying my grandfather's life in another direction. What he was saying is that his surprising survival through the night was a harbinger of future possibilities and a more abundant life. And that, of course, is all the word *miracle* means. Wonder. Harbinger. Sway. Even in the Western Scriptures, as I have pointed out many times, there are no words that mean *miracle* in the modern, and rather foolish theological sense of the word, meaning, a supernatural intervention from a Spirit outside the universe. The Greek and Hebrew words that are sometimes foolishly translated as "miracle" are as follows: oth, a harbinger, mopheth,

a wonder, pala, wondrous thing, dunamis, or powerful sway, or semion, a harbinger/sign.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me if that is what the word miracle means, then miracles are not rare, but they abound. Every spring bud, for one. Every challenge to inequity. Every truth told in place of a lie. Every act of forgiveness, small or great. Every question to self or others that deepens us. Every sunset we actually notice. Every moment of every friendship. Every time people are generous, or hospitable, or gracious or kind. Miracles all. Powerful sways. Wonders. Harbingers of a world both healthy and whole.

Many of the healing stories in the New Testament support the idea that miracles are not magic tricks, but social commentaries. They are always placed into a social context, which makes the healing more of a protest against the prevailing system than just an unexpected sway toward health for a lucky individual. One woman, a story says, had spent her entire income for years on the health care system, and had only gotten worse, not better. So in the story, her healing doesn't cost a red cent, and that's a decided critique against a system that had put her in the poor house. Another person had a bad back for 18 years, and when she was healed and stood up straight, people complained that it was the wrong time for her to be healed, because her gladness overshadowed the joy of the holiday they were celebrating. Again, you have here a point of social critique rather than a medical expose.

And the New Testament is only one place where you can find healing stories, or miracle stories, if you will. Every human culture I know of, past and present, offers theories and practices and sites for healing, both medical and extra-medical. And each of these places claims moderate success at offering wondrous healings of some forms of human brokenness. The Greeks and Romans built many healing centers called *Asklepions*, where the broken and sick came to spend the night and dream sacred visions which often healed them. The god Asklepios, and goddess Hygiea (from whose name we get our modern English word "hygiene,") were the patrons of the temple centers. The walls of these sanctuaries were lined with crutches and canes and eye-patches, deposited by the newly

healthy. There were also testimonies cut in stone, telling the healing stories to future generations. In the reading this morning from the walls of the Asklepion in Epidauros, the largest and most famous healing site of the ancient world, the story of Mr. Skeptic is told. Here is someone who has no real faith in the miraculous. He doubts the reality of all these healing stories. Yet he enters the shrine and sleeps on the floor as all the others do. At night, he dreams of Asklepios, who actually renames him Mr. Skeptic as well as straightening out his fingers.

It's a delightful story. And the man, though a complete skeptic in matters miraculous, is healed by a having a dream.

This technique of using dreams to heal, to make whole, is hardly some outmoded technique that hasn't been used since the Parthenon fell into ruin. The seminary I attended was famous for its dream courses. This church is filled with dream circles, where people, by sharing their dreams, come to a sense of deeper wholeness and understanding. I have used dreams when I have worked with a therapist to unravel some conundrum in my life. Dreams can be healing.

But the word "dream" or the word "vision" does not have to refer to either a night dream or even to the sorts of ecstatic visions which people reported at Lourdes or Epidauros. The word *vision* and its synonym *dream* also have a social meaning. Like those healing miracles in the New Testament I told you about. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr. was hardly talking about sleep when he claimed "I have a dream." And when Naomi King in her wonderful reading tells us that to be in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is *to work against* "conventional wisdom," she is talking about having a vision. Right here, right now. Not of a god or a saint. But it's a vision of a world where brokenness can be healed, where spirits are not broken, where broken-heartedness is not a permanent condition. A dream of a world where "Everyone is worth caring about, even if we have to struggle to see that." The dream is also one of a world where "We can have enough money and time, and give to others," one where we acknowledge openly and with humility that "There *is* such a thing as social inequity, and we're working to change that." The vision of this wondrous

community is a healing dream, not really different, really, from the dreams at Epidauros, except that here we are not just interested in finding healing for our own selves, but in helping to heal a wounded world, and in finding ways to celebrate and lift up life on the other side of wounding. And this, even though many of us are even *more* skeptical than Mr. Skeptic.

To support and be part of a community that holds such a wonderful vision, a community that stands against conventional wisdom with a radical freedom and inclusive embrace, seems something like a miracle to me. A miracle achieved not by gods and goddesses, but ordinary human beings who have decided enough is enough and who want to make dreams that transcend brokenheartedness a reality.

But it's *work*, says Naomi King. It requires stamina. That makes it sound like there is no pleasure in it, no joy in supporting an institution that tries to live out a vision of a just world.

It makes it sound like to do something wonderful, to do something miraculous you have to really put out a lot of wearying extra effort. Why would anyone want to do that? We have so many other things in our lives, so many other commitments, so many other loves.

Well, I understand. But I also want you to know that, I know something about miracles personally. I am now going to tell you about a miracle that involved generous financial contributions and a lot of work and organization. But to make this comparison more fun, I have to tell you it had nothing to do with church. That way, you might be able to see the miracle for what it is.

My friends Anne and Rosemary bought a house in Oakland, CA 23 years ago. Ann's elderly father was going to live in the house with them. The house was, let's be kind here, a fixer-upper. It needed work. But, because of her father, she needed to move in right away. So thinking of an Amish barn-raising, Anne called thirty or so of her friends and colleagues and asked them, with the promise of pizza and beer, if they would come over on a certain Saturday and paint and fix the entire house. In one day.

It was intense, but you know what? We all showed up. Those of us who knew how to paint and fix things showed those that didn't how to do it, and in 12 hours, the entire house was painted inside and out, windows and doors fixed, floors polished. It was amazing. It gleamed.

Some weeks later, Anne called me up and said "Hey Belletini, I know you know how to cook for multitudes, and like doing so, so I am asking you to come and cook a wonderful Italian supper to thank all the folks who helped me paint and fix the house."

"I'd love to, " I said. "Sounds like fun."

So we chose a day for the party and she invited everyone. We went shopping all morning. And by 2, I was in the kitchen, chopping, blending, sautéing. She had said about 40 people were coming. That seemed more than the number who had painted the house, but I thought, well, maybe people are bringing partners or friends.

Soon I had three pastas going in three different pots and was in a frenzy. People were showing up along the sidewalk outside the kitchen, and I wasn't sure I'd finish in time. Anne suddenly burst into the kitchen and said "You *have* to come out for the door prize drawing." I said "No I don't. I have three pots boiling here and I can't leave. Besides, I am helping you with the party so it's not fair if my name is drawn."

"Just for a minute!" she said with authority I knew I couldn't resist. "And anyway, you helped me paint, so I put your name into the hat."

So I walk outside, wave to the gathered folks without much of a smile on my face. I am impatient to get back in the kitchen. And they draw names from the hat. "3rd prize: A bottle of *chianti* for Lindi Ramsden. Second prize: A coupon for three free pizzas for Art Ungar. And first prize: A month long free trip to Italy with hotels, Eurail pass, and spending money for.... Mark Belletini."

Now, I want you to know, I did not believe this.

I mean, who would?

Then I looked out at the silent faces staring at me intently, waiting for my response, and realized that I had been wondrously hoodwinked into cooking my own surprise party. I saw faces there that did not belong to people who had painted so I knew how wide they had cast their net. When I realized what they had done, I locked myself into the kitchen, pushed a credenza in front of the door to block it, and cried for a good long time.

Turns out, Anne, Rosemary and two other colleagues, Janne and Robbie, were sitting around one day and talking about trips to Europe, when one of them asked “Belletini has never gone before, has he?” “How could he?” Anne asked. “He serves at a very small church, and I sometimes wonder if rent itself is a concern of his.” (It was.) So one of them said “Let organize a ‘Send Belletini to Italy’ circle.” And immediately, they thought this zany, generous and joyous idea was simply wonderful. They worked hard, but with a skip in their step, to make that wonderful idea take flesh.

And that summer, I walked the streets of my ancestral Bologna for the first time, and climbed the Etruscan ruins in Fiesole. And I wept each and every day as much as I laughed, for I assure you, it’s amazing to be on the receiving end of miracle. No mere words can convey how much!

Now you need to know, this was not about me. Because, you see, there were folks at that party I didn’t know very well. Or at all. But when they heard that they could contribute money to do something wonderful, something that appeared to be nothing less than a miracle, they all wanted in on it. People were beating down their doors to contribute to something so unexpected, so unimaginable, so wonderful. And 23 years later, the people who were part of that event are still joyous to have been part of it. I still get calls about it. The sister of my heart, Rev. Barbara Pescan was there...she preached on this very story last week up in Evanston. She is still, so many years later, completely electrified and transformed by the whole idea of giving and organizing to work a miracle.

But remember, this story is not about me. It's simply a model for what this canvass is about. It's not to send some poor bloke to Rome, but it's about joyously giving together so that there is more healing in this world, not less. And its about the same point made by the children's story this morning, namely, that its good to work together to create something wonderful. It's about more dreams acted out instead of deferred with cries of hopelessness and mere practicality. It's about more visions for organizing around anti-oppression work, not so someone gets to walk the Appian Way, but so that someone in the society we serve might not be kept away from the welcome table. The miracles of healing we propose are not instantaneous, nor are they supernatural. But the world is filled with brokenness, folks, both social and personal. And if we are not about addressing that, joyously miraculously, wondrously, then what are we about? If we are not a harbinger of a better world, and only a reflection of what Naomi King calls conventional wisdom, then why bother? And if it can be such a transforming joy to be part of such a wonder, such a miracle, as my story about my surprise-party made amply clear to me, then what's keeping us back?

Let's cook our own surprise party and invite the world and surprise them too.

The vision is clear. The dream is beautiful.
The need is evident. The joy is tangible. And what can better than that?

Circle Prayer

The circle of our history:

Prophets and seekers, teachers and pilgrims, misfits and mentors: we are as much a part of it

as Emerson and Susan B. Anthony,

as Channing and Olympia Brown,

as Thandeka and Rabindrananth Tagore.

The circle of our world:

The poor and the privileged, the struggling and the wondering, the whole and the broken:

we are just as much a part of it

as Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt, Jesus and Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King Jr. and Black Elk. Oh Love, greater Circle around our smaller circles, circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere, here we are, a community that struggles and loves and falls and rejoices and dances and feasts and learns and copes and thrives and joys. Deepen our community so that as we turn face to face, we keep on turning until we face the world outside, where the real flaming chalice of justice, compassion and love is even now being kindled. Amen.